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FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

Beginning This Issue
Full Length Novel

THE TAKING OF A RANCH
By V.A. Glover

A YOUNG MAN'S GAME
By Alfred Bouscal

THE WILD ONE
By Wayne Barton

RETURNING TO THE OLD PLACE
By Patrick Clay

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AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

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MEMBER

WESTERN WRITERS
OF AMERICA

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NOTICE

This is the fifth issue of FAR WEST, and a good place to pause and look back on the trail we've been blazing. Since the first issue went on sale we've noticed that many publishing houses have increased the number of westerns that they have scheduled for publication each month. Also, a number of new western films and television series are in the works for the new season this fall. So, everything considered, it looks like the western is coming back in a big way.

Doing our bit to help it along we have just signed an agreement with Louis L'Amour to publish several more of his western short stories—something every fan of his won't want to miss—which means that if you aren't already one of our subscribers, and like Louis L'Amour, you better sign up now, 'cause FAR WEST sells out mighty fast when we have one of Louis L'Amour's stories on board.

Beginning with this issue we are running a two part western novel, *The Taking Of A Ranch* by Voyle Glover. Drop us a line and let us know what you think of running two or three part stories in future issues of FAR WEST.

A lot of you have written in asking for a little information on the authors we feature in FAR WEST. Beginning next month we will put out a "dodger" on one or more of the authors featured in that issue, giving you a little background, as well as information about what they've written in the past, and any new works that they may have scheduled for release in the future.

Our list of the TOP 25 WESTERN MOVIES is filling up fast, with fewer than sixty votes separating the top rated picture from number twenty five. This is your last call to let us know your favorite, because next month the results will be official, and will be published in the August Issue of FAR WEST, on sale July 4th.

FAR WEST

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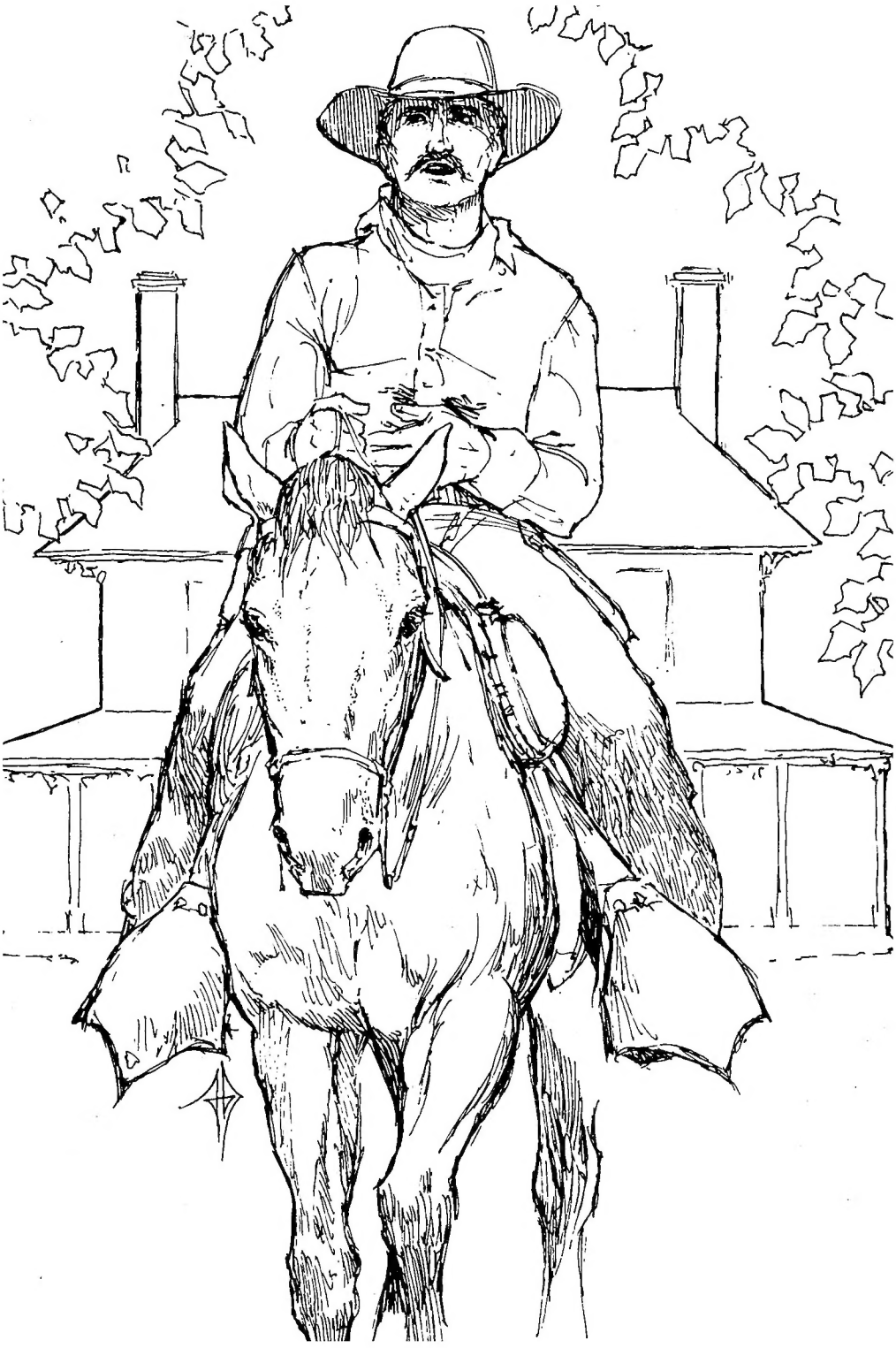

RETURNING TO THE OLD PLACE

By Patrick Clay

orey Lang traveled hard along the road that led from Seguin. Behind him the Texas sun was setting, leaving the sky in torrid furrows of pink and orange. It was autumn now and the days were much shorter. He found himself having to ride into the night to avoid his relentless pursuers.

The blazing, arid terrain that reached up from the Mexican border was behind him. The land was hilly and green, he could feel the nearness of his home in East Texas as he galloped through the leafy, cool corridors of the forest. He felt stronger now and he ran his hand along the neck of the sweating sorrel, in an effort to convey the feeling to him. The mesquite was behind him, the yellow sand was behind him. But *they* were still behind him, too.

The chase had started innocently enough. He had killed a man in a nasty little border town, and they tried to arrest him for it. He could only suppose that they didn't know who he was. His name and reputation had always been enough to cool the ardor of the small town lawmen that he had come in contact with. This might be the Rangers. There was something odd about this. He wanted to go home.

He reined the horse over to the side of the road. It was dark

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now and they crossed a plowed field. He stole a drink from an ancient pump that stood on the outskirts of a plantation. He was tired, but he couldn't stop, not this time. Maybe they were relatives of the man that he had killed. Over the cotton fields, over a fence, through the night he raced. The detour was successful, he had lost them, for a time at least. He had lost them before, but they always picked up the trail.

He finally stopped, in a nameless place, behind an anonymous barn. He dismounted stiffly and looked about. This would have to do. He sat down and leaned against the wall of a lean-to shed that was attached to the barn. He ate nothing, he drank nothing. His horse remained saddled. He slid his wooden-handled .45 from its holster and caressed it familiarly. It was cool and reassuring, he feared nothing while it rested in his hand. It was this fearlessness that had caused all of his troubles.

Deftly, he rolled a cigarette. A golden harvest moon was rising beyond the trees. The light of a match flickered across his face. His beard was dark and grimy now. He had always prided himself upon his appearance. He mournfully exhaled the smoke. He knew that they would get him this time.

Sleep came, but only fitfully. Two hours before dawn found the man once again in the saddle. Home was not so far away now. He avoided Houston, circling north. There were too many people, too many lawmen there. The morning coldness did not go away today. The coming of the new season left him with an eerie feeling. He lifted the collar of his jacket up against the back of his neck and slowed his pace. The journey was almost at an end. Corey Lang was not a man given to running, he faced his problems wherever they arose. It was just that, this time, he wanted to go home.

The sorrel loped along Trinity Bay. It was pale gray and peaceful, the way that it had always been. Dead and living cypress trees stabbed its hazy horizon. He rode along the sandy beach, beneath the shady foliage of the huge old trees that leaned over it. A gentle breeze raised and lowered the dark green limbs. It was a splendid time of year.

The tired horse and rider passed through Anahuac. He had been away for a long time, few people would recognize him, he supposed. He nodded politely to an old black man that he remembered, but there was no light of recognition in the man's face. The scared boy that left Anahuac fifteen years ago, bore little resemblance to the dusty hawk-featured killer that returned. The black man waved back politely. Tom Calder's "Independence Tavern" was still there, beyond the edge of town. It was there that Corey Lang killed his first man, the sheriff of Chambers County. It was a half-adobe, half-log structure that defied the ravages of time. The man tied his horse to the hitching post that stood out front.

The interior of the saloon was dark and a bit warm. The huge old wood stove was filled with red glowing embers. He was home, where people didn't really know what cold weather was, so they dutifully lit their stoves when they thought the season was right. Tom Calder watched him walk, straight and tall, from the door to the bar. By the time he reached the bar, he knew who the dusty stranger was.

"Well I'm a son of a bitch, Corey Lang. That is you, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Calder, it's me," he said quietly. He did not return the barman's smile. Corey Lang never smiled, but he shook the older man's hand courteously.

"How about a beer, Corey?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Calder. I'll take a whiskey though." Mr. Calder handed him a bottle and a glass. He poured the drink with steady hands, hands so precise they seemed machine-like.

The drink was hard and fiery and it burned down his gullet. It felt good and he quickly poured another. It felt good to know that there was something as hard as himself. They talked idly for a few moments. The gun man spoke very little, but answered every question put to him. Finally Calder asked him.

"What brings you back, Corey?" Lang looked at him for a moment and set down his glass on the bar. He looked over his shoulder at the rugged tables and chairs. They were alone.

"Runnin.' Just runnin' and ended up here. I wanted to see the old place again." Mr. Calder looked down at the bar self-consciously as he tried to find the proper words.

"I guess you heard . . . about your mother dyin' and all?"

No, he hadn't heard. A hurt expression came into the cold, brutal face. It was the same expression that Tom Calder had seen in the face of the boy whose father was killed by the sheriff of Chambers County. Calder could not prevent himself from shuddering.

"I guess not then. I'm sorry. I'm sorry it had to be me telling you about it. It wasn't too long ago. Taking care of that place was too much for her, you know."

"Yeah, I expect so."

"Y'all have had hard times and bad luck, ever since . . . ."

"I've got no regrets. I've never worked a day in my life. I owe the sheriff for that, he did me a favor. I paid him back for it, too," said Lang, the hurt expression quickly vanishing and being replaced by the more natural, blank one.

"I really hate it, that you gotta be on the run at a time like this," said Tom Calder.

"It don't matter. It don't bother me. A man pays for everything he gets and for everything he does, after a while it don't bother him. He don't look for any free shots and he don't give any. Your life is better, Mr. Calder, but that's the way mine is . . ." said Corey Lang evenly. His hand rested comfortably on the wooden handle of his pistol, he looked cautiously toward the door. " . . . I better be going."

Mr. Calder refused payment for the drinks. The young man accepted the kindness graciously, turned and left. He had always been such a polite boy, it was very difficult to believe that he had done all of the things that he was said to have done. It had been difficult, but now that Mr. Calder had seen him, he believed all of the stories. Life can certainly change a man, he mused.

The gunman rode along the beach again, in the direction of his parent's home. It was a beautiful, green spot that ran right

down to the shore. There were barbed wire fences now, however, that ran down to the beach. It became necessary to return to the road and enter the old place through its front gate.

It hadn't changed much, nothing really changed much in that time and place, so he expected it to be the same. There was even a fresh coat of paint on the old shiplap, two-story house. He felt warm and breathless when he first saw the old building. He was home. He stepped off his horse and dropped the reins.

Someone was inside. His hand hovered over the wooden handle of his gun. The door swung open and a plain, dark-haired woman stepped out onto the porch. She was his own age. He watched her silently, waiting for her to recognize him. His narrow eyes shifted rapidly over the upper story windows. He sensed that she was alone there.

"Hello, Corey," she said.

"Hello."

"I've been cleaning up your old house."

"That's mighty nice of you." The gunman looked over his shoulder. "Well, how have you been?" he asked at last.

"Fine, just fine, Corey. I married Bob Johnson, we live over at the next house, the old Smith place. We have two boys now."

"Well I'll be damned. I'm glad to hear that."

"I'm sorry about your mother," the woman said. She looked down at the floor of the porch. "And about your dad too . . . . I never had a chance to tell you that." He accepted her condolences with a mute nod.

"The place looks pretty good, pretty good," he said.

"Bob says if we take care of it for ten years it'll be ours. Squatter's rights, you know. That's the way the law reads. That's if you're not moving back in or selling it or anything."

"No, I won't be. If that's the way the law reads, I imagine y'all will be entitled to it—in ten years. But today it'll be mine," he said a little bitterly. "There'll be some men coming here for me, soon. It'd be best if you went on back to your place, I guess." She looked a little hurt, a little ashamed.

"It was nice seeing you again, though, Corey. You look just fine."

"You too." She picked up her dress and walked down the steps. She quickly walked in the direction of her own home. The man stepped up onto the porch, turned and looked out over the front yard. It was bordered by the swampy, almost tropical coastal vegetation. He took a deep breath, then cautiously he studied the different shades of green of the forest that surrounded him. He had a few minutes yet.

Some of the old furniture was still in the house. He climbed the steps to his old room. Brushing back a curtain, he looked out over the ghostly bay. It was very still outside. The stillness made it easy to hear the pounding of horses' hooves. He stepped quickly over to the front window.

Five riders swarmed into his yard, surrounding his skittish horse. So there you are, he thought. They were a tough looking bunch. A tall lean man jumped off his horse and unsheathed his rifle. Corey Lang slowly drew his pistol.

"Corey Lang!" The man's voice echoed against the emptiness of the bay. "Come outa there, you murderin' bastard!" The gunman watched him intently. He coolly and deliberately slipped a cigarette between his lips and lit it. "This is Captain Hardy, Texas Rangers!" Glad to know it, the hunted man thought.

"You can have a rope or a bullet," another of the men shouted from the back of his horse. The men looked big and strange below him there. Men that tried to kill you always looked big and strange. He had never faced five men in a fight before. Thoughtfully, he exhaled some smoke over his shoulder.

If he had had a rifle, he would have killed one of them, possibly two. But he was only moderately certain of the accuracy of the handgun from here. He wanted the first shot fired to be his, and he wanted it to be accurate; that would give him an advantage, and an advantage in the hands of Corey Lang was a dangerous thing. Two of the men dismounted.

"Maybe he's out in the woods," one of them said to the

other. Two men remained on their horses. One was only a boy, the other was a dark and menacing character. The dark one glared suspiciously toward the second-story windows, a revolver was balanced across his saddle horn, the other hand held his reins. Lang could tell that he was uncomfortable sitting there. That man would be hard to deal with.

Captain Hardy kicked open the front door. There was an explosion from within and he flew backward, sliding down the steps and landing in an inanimate heap on the ground. The two mounted men bolted for the front gate. The other two had no choice but to seek cover along the side of the house.

Corey Lang sat at the top of the stairs, calmly watching the open door. He let the spent cartridge fall from the cylinder of his old friend, and quickly replaced it with another. The dark man and the boy came crouching and running across the yard to join the other two. Lang saw them run by the open door but he made no attempt to shoot them. He got to his feet and walked across the floor, gently he pushed back a curtain. The men were directly below him. Brazenly, he hung half of his body out of the window and fired down into them. The .45 leapt and spat confidently in his hand. The men scattered, one left spread-eagled on his face, the blood draining from him through two holes in his back.

The sudden violence left the gunman unshaken. Experience, familiarity, was the best antidote for fear. This was just one of many incidents. Maybe they would leave him alone, maybe they wouldn't. It was just a question of individual courage. Corey Lang didn't know much about courage. He had always had to fight, he had never been given any choice. He didn't really know what he would have done, had anyone ever given him the opportunity to walk away from a fight. He had no virtues, and few vices, this was merely a procedure for him. He heard their boots on the porch. He stepped quickly back to the head of the stairs.

They had caught him somewhat off-guard, for they were already in the house. The three looked up, horrified, to see the deadly monster at the top of the stairs. Almost frozen with

terror, they could barely move their limbs. The dark man squeezed off two shots, but they only whined along the stairway. Corey Lang stood there before them and three other reverberating shots came screaming toward him. Methodically, he extended his arm and with great sureness of purpose dropped his foresight across the chest of one of them and pumped the trigger twice. Oblivious to the shells exploding around him, he steered the muzzle toward a second victim. But the dark man and the boy ran, ran and crawled frantically back out the front door. On the floor lay a badly wounded older man. He looked up, his eyes and mouth wide open.

"You hit me, Lang. You're quite a man," he said. The cold reptilian eyes studied their prey. Without batting an eye, Corey Lang fired again into the defenseless man, tearing his face off and gutting his skull.

"I'll go out in the front and face him down," the dark man whispered breathlessly, "you come in the back way and get him." The boy bobbed his head in agreement. His lithe form scampered rapidly to the back of the house.

"Lang," the man called out. "It's just you and me, Lang." He walked from the side of the house to stand before the opened front door. "There's nobody here but me and you and a boy. Come out and face me, Lang." The dark man holstered his pistol. He knew that he made a grand target out here, but he also knew that Corey Lang was winning this contest of dodging and hiding. Man to man, he might have a chance, he was very good with a pistol, maybe as good as Lang. And then there was the boy. He had a very good chance.

Lang stalked down the stairs, he peered out the window. He couldn't see the boy, therefore he would not step outside. He considered riddling the dark man from the cover of the house. But it didn't matter, he shrugged, he could kill him just as easily without cover. He stepped into the doorway. There was darkness behind him, he was hard to see. It was impossible for anyone to pick him off from the side of the house. The dark man's lips tightened, sweat cascaded down his forehead and

dropped from the tip of his nose. Corey Lang slipped his pistol back in its holster.

A man's hand can move very fast at times: when he swats an insect, when he catches his child from a bad fall. But it never moves more urgently than when it seeks the handle of a gun. The utter concentration, practice and natural ability assured Corey Lang that he would win. He moved first, he drew first and he fired first, evenly and well.

The .45 blazed and there was a hideous wail. The dark man rose from the ground and was thrown backward, slinging his unused gun through the air. Lang's concentration was interrupted, however, he heard something behind him. He spun around and fired at where he thought the sound was located. He missed, but the boy was paralyzed with fear, his gun falling from his weakened grip. His shaky legs would not support him, he fell down onto the bottom step of the stairway.

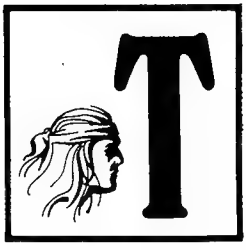
"Please, Mr. Lang, don't shoot me," he cried. "Please, Mr. Lang," he whined. Lang rocked his pistol back in his hand, uncocking it. He looked at the boy for a moment, his face without expression. Then he thought of the dark man and looked over his shoulder. When he turned back around, he heard the deafening blast of a pistol. A gun had never sounded that loud to him before, probably because he wasn't prepared for it this time. It felt as if someone had struck him in the abdomen with a hammer. His mouth twitched painfully but he did not stagger, his animal reflexes jerked the .45 up from his side. The boy had shot him and then dropped his gun. He was crying, looking up at Corey Lang and knowing that he was about to die. Lang aimed down steadily. He felt his own blood running cold down the front of his shirt. He holstered his pistol, turned and walked out the door. He walked past the dark man. He was dead. He grabbed the reins of the sorrel and gingerly lifted himself up onto the saddle.

He looked out at the old place. It sure looked nice. He reined the horse back toward the road and loped along slowly.

"Damn, that hurts," he said aloud.

THE WILD ONE

By Wayne Barton



he horse was not one of the best. She was a brown mare with long awkward legs and rickety ribs that showed hoop-like through her tight-stretched skin. Mesteno had picked her out days before, even before his talk with the Indian Agent. She would be balky and almost useless for work, no great loss to Juanito's herd, but Mesteno had seen in her the qualities of toughness and endurance he would need. It had been twenty years and more since Mesteno had slipped into an enemy's camp on a pony raid, and he felt the blood-pounding excitement of the old days gripping his chest as he crept through the shadows thrown by the waning moon. There were no guards here, though. He cut the mare out of the picket line, speaking softly to gentle her, threw the rawhide saddle on her back and led her away. It might be bad to start the Journey by stealing, but Juanito was of the Mimbreno people, his own cousin's grandson. He would understand.

The Indian agent, Preston, had not understood. Mesteno had gone to him nine days before, squatting in the dust outside the Fort Stanton Agency until the white man could find time for him. There had been a time when a war chief of the Mimbreno would have died before awaiting the pleasure of the white-eyes. But the snow of almost seventy winters lay heavy in Mesteno's bones and the hatred in him had long ago burned to black ash. He waited patiently until the fat agent came out to greet him.

"You wanted to see me, Mesteno?"

Mesteno got slowly to his feet, brushing dust from his jeans. "I need talk with white chief," he said in his grating voice.

Preston smiled uneasily. "Of course. What do you want?"

It was hard to put into words. The agent spoke neither Apache nor Spanish, so Mesteno had to make do with his clumsy English.

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"I am old man. Have been war chief. Lead many warriors against the Mexicano. Lead many warriors against white-eyes."

"Yes, yes, I know that. I am busy."

"Years ago I come in. Soldiers send me here. Now it is time to die. I go back Mimbreno land, die there. You sign paper."

Preston made an impatient gesture. "Impossible," he said. "The terms of your surrender forbid you to leave the reservation. You know that."

"I go. You sign paper."

But Preston had only called for the Indian policeman to take the crazy old man back to his hogan. Mesteno had known it would end that way, but he had to try. The Journey must begin correctly.

The rawhide saddle had grown stiff and unfamiliar with the years. Mesteno knew his muscles would be aching soon. It was harder to find the cave than he expected, for he had not been there for many years. He tied the mare outside and struck a light to enter. The little pile of earth and rock was just as it had been ten—no, thirteen years ago. He remembered the day well.

"Six warriors, four women, seven children, coming in under the treaty. No weapons captured."

Mesteno had stood within a yard of the young lieutenant who spoke those words, straight and hard for all his fifty-five years. The hatred was a flame in him then, fed by the bite of the leg irons that marked another broken promise. Behind him, also chained, stood his five men—five of the eighty that had left the San Carlos Reservation a year before. The others had been left at burning rancheros or disputed waterholes, were dead of hunger and cold and sickness in the Sierra Madre. Six men, four women, seven children. Seventeen of the People alive out of two hundred. Mesteno's war trail had ended there.

He thrust the flickering pine knot into a chink in the rock and bent to scoop away the dirt. After a moment, he pulled out a long bundle wrapped in rags and deerskin. The wrapping fell away at the touch of his knife and the old Spencer rifle gleamed in the firelight.

Mesteno hefted it, chuckling a little. Even the blue soldiers didn't know everything. He loaded the weapon carefully and tied the packet of shells up behind his saddle, then swung stiffly onto the mare's back and turned her head to the west.

Jim Catron was enjoying himself. He had been annoyed by the summons to Captain Henry's office, expecting another of the endless lectures on some point of discipline he had overlooked. Instead, Henry had waved him to a chair and proceeded to take apart agent Preston with the same sharp-tongued skill he often lavished on Jim. The agent was sweating and furious by the time Henry was through.

"See here," Preston burst out at last in desperation, "the military is responsible for the security of the Agency! If this old reprobate has left the reservation, it is your responsibility, not mine!"

Henry turned from pacing the narrow room to eye Preston. "Indeed, sir? Then my report cannot fail to mention that Mesteno told you of his intent to leave the reservation, and that you neglected to mention it to the military. Would not that be your responsibility, sir?"

Preston let that go. "Make no mistake about it, Henry, I want him back. If that old fool creates a scandal, I'll not bear the blame alone. Dead or alive, I want him back!"

"Shall I turn out the regiment, sir?" Jim murmured. "An uprising of this magnitude requires desperate measures."

A wintry smile played on Henry's lips. "That won't be necessary, Lieutenant. Perhaps a smaller force."

"This is not a joke," Preston grated. "And you, Catron. Don't think your father's rank will protect you if you botch this. I'll get both—"

"That will do, sir!"

Henry's roar cut through the agent's voice like an axe. "Leave this office! You have—at last—done your duty. Go back to your office and falsify ration lists to please your political friends."

"You can't—"

"Get out!"

Preston left, slamming the door. Captain Henry glared after him a moment, turned back to his desk. All the anger seemed to go out of him, and he smiled wryly as he sank into his chair.

"There'll be hell to pay over that," he said with some satisfaction. "I'll get a reprimand within the month."

Jim smiled. "And I was only today thinking this post was dull."

"Still thinking about the news from the Dakotas, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. The battle at Wounded Knee Creek in January. There were decorations and promotions there, while we rot in barracks!"

"You won't. Not for a while." Henry smiled again. "Lieutenant, you will bring in Mesteno. Take Sergeant Trent and five men. Horsethief Frank will scout for you. Five days' rations, I think. He'll have a two-day start on you."

"Yes, sir." Jim made to rise, but Henry held up a hand.

"You will bring him in alive if at all possible, lieutenant. It is possible he won't let himself be taken."

"Surely you exaggerate, sir," Jim said. "Why, the old man must be seventy, and it's two hundred miles to the Mimbres Valley. We'll pick him up within a day."

Henry coughed and covered his mouth. "No doubt." He smiled again as Jim rose to leave.

"Mesteno is a famous man, lieutenant. You'll get your name in the dispatches. Your father, the general, will be pleased."

"Thank you, sir. I'll give him your regards—when I return to Washington."

He saluted stiffly and left the room. As always, Henry had managed to irritate him. Colonel Leck, his father's old drinking crony, had warned him about Henry. The man had been on the frontier too long. The West got into a man's mind, made him unfit for other duty now that the old days were gone. Jim Catron would go back to Washington and advancement, but Henry would either retire or die a captain. Jim grinned at the thought. The arrest of Mesteno would look good in his record,

something to talk about over dinner with due modesty. No one would need to know how easy it had really been.

The dispatch rider shouldn't even have been there. His route from Fort Craig to Fort Stanton was laid out along the main road, but he was doing a useless job anyway, carrying official copies of orders telegraphed the week before. He knew that one more night wouldn't matter, and he had swung south to Three Rivers to see the Mexican girl he knew there. He was thinking happily of her that morning as he kicked his tired pony over a little rise, making up time to Fort Stanton.

For a moment, he stared blankly at the armed and mounted Apache coming up the other side, and that moment was too long. He reined his mount in hard with one hand, bending low in the saddle as he clawed at his carbine sling with the other. Then the Indian's bullet took him in the chest and slammed him backward to the ground.

Mesteno curbed the rearing mare viciously as the roar of the Spencer echoed down the ridges. He had been riding with the rifle across the saddle bow because he had no scabbard and had fired almost by instinct. He slipped to the ground and looped the reins around a bush, pulling them tight because the horse wanted to run. The man he had shot lay still, face down on the rocky ground. Mesteno loaded and cocked the Spencer and came forward to turn him over. The trooper was young, with blond hair and a flowing blond mustache. His eyes were blue. There was blood on his dusty uniform blouse, and he was dead.

The cavalry horse had bucked and kicked until the saddle was around under its belly. Now it stood still. Mesteno caught its bridle and tied it. It would be a better mount than the mare. He pondered a moment, then turned away. This was not a raid. This was the Journey, and now he had done great wrong.

"I should not have killed," he told the dead soldier formally in Apache. "You came upon me by surprise. It was not the time for killing."

He mounted the mare and kicked her into a trot, always

toward the west. This was bad. The blue soldiers were on his track, would soon be here. Now they would never let him go.

The circling buzzards brought the detail late the next day. Horsethief Frank, the long-nosed Navajo scout, saw them first and swung his arm to lead the column toward them. Jim Catron stood in his stirrups and shaded his eyes to watch the planing birds.

"Well, sergeant, I think it's over. He's down over there."

"Maybe. Sir."

Jim glanced at him in annoyance. First Sergeant Trent was an old hand and a good one. Fifteen years ago, he had been Phil Sheridan's perfect cavalryman: a bachelor under twenty-five, a perfect horseman, and weighing less than a hundred thirty pounds. Fifteen years in the southwest had burned him to a dry cinder of a man, leather-tough and wiry as a cat, with more knowledge of the country, Captain Henry said, than any other man alive. Even so, there was no reason he should turn the "sir" into a separate, ironic sentence each time he spoke to Jim.

The horses topped a ridge and the men could see the dark figure on the ground with the black birds around it. A horse stood nearby. Jim reined in and halted the column, feeling satisfied.

"Well, now what do you say, sergeant? There he is."

Trent was peering with open anxiety toward the scene. "That looks mighty like a troop horse in Army rig," he said. He glanced at Jim. "I'll be glad to ride down for a look, lieutenant."

For answer Jim lifted his hand and brought it down. He and Trent led the way down the ridge, five troopers strung out behind. The buzzards scattered, flapping heavily into the air ahead of the horses to reveal the thing on the ground.

Jim had time for a good, clear look before he could turn away, sick and shaking, clinging helplessly to the saddle as his stomach heaved. Dimly, he heard Trent issuing orders in a flat, unemotional voice, and in that moment he hated the little sergeant more bitterly than he would have thought possible. When he could straighten up, the body was covered with an

Army blanket. Trent was looking at him, eyes bright with contempt. Frank was expressionless as usual, but a couple of the privates didn't look too well. Trent held out a pair of leather saddlebags.

"Dispatch rider from Craig. Sir. Shot once in the chest, and dead a couple of days."

Jim took the saddlebags automatically. "It had to be Mesteno."

"Looks like it. Sir." Trent looked up at him. "We could take him in, sir. Our orders didn't cover this, and those dispatches got to be delivered."

Jim had been thinking the same thing. He might even have given the orders if the sergeant hadn't suggested it. As it was, he pulled himself erect in the saddle and gave Trent a stony stare.

"Detail one man to take the body back to Stanton and report. He'll tell Captain Henry that I request Mesteno's description be telegraphed ahead and patrols sent to intercept him."

"Yes, sir. How about us, sir?"

"We're going on, sergeant. My orders are to take Mesteno, and by God, that's what I'm going to do. Understood, sergeant?"

"Yes. Sir."

"Then do it."

Trent turned to issue the orders, a grim smile playing on his lips. The shavetail could get mad, at least. He'd need more than big talk to bring down that old buzzard Mesteno, though, and Trent was betting he didn't have it.

The telegraph line lay across the land, its poles marching over the barren hills as far as Mesteno's dimmed eyes could see. He reined in the tired mare and looked up at the wire. The blue soldiers were close behind him. He had seen their dust and the glow of their fires crossing the grim waterless waste of the San Andres Mountains, and he had hidden from their patrols to cross the green river that told him the Journey was half done. Even now, they might be waiting for him along the talking wire.

Mesteno eased the mare over to one of the telegraph poles and pulled her up, speaking gently in her ear. He took his knife in his teeth and hauled himself up in the saddle, reaching with one hand to grasp the splintery pole. Slowly he started to come erect, but the trembling in his legs frightened the mare. The horse moved and Mesteno fell heavily, catching himself on the saddle. He clung there a moment, dazed, then dismounted to pick up the knife. The shame was bitter in him, with the memory of the days when he had broken the lines out of Fort Thorn in a dozen places on a single day. He had climbed the poles then, or his men had thrown ropes over them and let their ponies drag them to the ground.

He chuckled aloud at the thought of the scrawny mare dragging at the pole. She shied a little at the sound and he laughed and slapped her on the neck.

"We are not what we were, old horse," he murmured. "But perhaps there are a few suns left in us yet. Come!"

Beyond these foothills lay the mountains, and beyond the mountains stretched another fifty miles to the Mimbres. In a day and a half, perhaps two with the tiring mare, he would be home. All he had to do was stay away from the soldiers for that long. Mesteno stood in his stirrups to look back along his trail. All his life he had hidden from pursuing troops, from Mexican lancers and American cavalry on both sides of the border. The blue troopers had never caught him then, though there were many after him. He was back in his country now, and it was strange to the soldiers who followed. They would not catch him this time.

The Florida Mountains loomed on the southern horizon like jagged teeth in a monster's jawbone. To the west, Cooke's Mountains and Massacre Peak were closer, near enough to make out boulders dotting the waterless slopes. Jim Catron raised a hand to stop the column and rode up to meet Horsethief Frank. Trent rode with him. Jim's tailored uniform was much the worse for five days on the trail. He had lost his headquarters fat and his gaunt, bearded face had a grim set.

"You've found the trail?"

Frank nodded. "He is hiding now. Hard to track. Many rock. But I find him." He pointed west, toward the shoulder of the mountains. "He goes there."

"Still toward the Mimbres." Jim nodded, slowly. "Trent, you know this country?"

"Yes, sir. Fort Cummings'll be over to the foot of the mountain there. I was there in '86 when Geronimo was up." Trent leaned on his saddle and stared at Jim insolently. "That'd be before the lieutenant's time."

Jim started to say something, glanced at Frank, and changed his mind. "We'll need supplies, sergeant. Where can we get them?"

Trent squinted into the sun. "Oak Grove's about eight miles northwest. They'll have rations. The Apache, he's got to go through the pass south of town. We can pick up his trail there—if the lieutenant wants to go on."

"The lieutenant does. You'll keep the men together in town, sergeant. We're only staying long enough to pick up rations."

Oak Grove was a mining town. The hills around were scarred with gray mounds of tailings and the people were scarred with the effort of tearing wealth from a harsh land. They looked without welcome at the column of dirty troopers that straggled down the street and pulled up at the general store. Jim dismounted his patrol to rest and water the horses and went up the creaking wooden steps.

"Catron, Eighth Cavalry," he told the proprietor briskly. "My men need supplies. Bacon, hardtack, coffee, sugar. We need remounts if they're available."

"That so?" The man shifted his cud of tobacco and looked at Jim critically. "Looks like you could use a new shirt, too, soldier boy. Can you pay for all that?"

Jim stiffened, checked the first reply that came to his mind. Offended dignity didn't go with five days of trail dirt.

"I'll give you a draft on the Fort Stanton commissary. You know that's good. We'll need—"

"Cash," the man said. "No reason I should take paper from you."

"I am an officer of the United States Army in the performance of his duty. I have no time to waste here." He could feel Mesteno reaching the pass, getting farther and farther away. The storekeeper was unimpressed.

"Been a long time since the Army gave orders around here."

"Since Geronimo was up in '86?"

The man flushed darkly. "Cash!"

Jim stood there, his mind ranging over many things: the trouble this man could make; the effect on his career and the staff job waiting for him; a ragged old Apache climbing the scree slopes of Cooke's range; and, at last, Captain Henry in his cramped office at Fort Stanton, where he would die a captain. "Lieutenant, you will bring in Mesteno." It seemed a long time that he thought, but it was only a moment. Then he turned toward the door.

"Trent!"

The sergeant came on the run.

"Take two men and pack what we need. Make up a receipt for this gentleman and I'll sign it. I'm going to see to the remounts." He paused, looking coldly at the storekeeper. "If he tries to stop you, tie him up."

Trent snapped his mouth closed on a protest and grinned. "Yes, sir! Brooks! O'Neil! Get in here, you coyotes! We have work to do!"

Blue troopers rode slowly up the narrow canyon. They were tired and their bodies rolled loosely in the saddle with the motion of the horses. The point man and scout came first, a hundred yards ahead, one watching the canyon walls while the other studied the ground. The officer was next, with the sergeant three yards behind and the other three strung out to escape the dust.

One by one, they filed across the notched rear sight of Mesteno's rifle. He shifted on his rocky ledge, following the officer, holding the bead of the front sight at the base of the man's

spine. So the pack would hunt the old wolf, would they? Mesteno chuckled softly, his finger caressing the trigger. His men had waited many times for the shot that would signal the ambush, the destruction of another pursuing force.

He lowered the rifle. There were no warriors awaiting this signal. They were long dead, in savage rear guard fights against the pursuers who finally were too many. Now he would follow them, and his journey was almost ended. He would not kill again. He lay quiet on the ledge until the troopers were out of sight, then picked his way to the waiting mare. Below him, the column dragged to a halt as the scout cantered back to talk to Jim.

"He double back on trail along here. We lost him right now."

Jim mopped his face with his filthy yellow neckcloth. He raised his eyes toward the mouth of the canyon and the blue shoulder of Mimbres Peak beyond.

"It's all right. We'll pick him up again. We know where he's going."

The valley of the Mimbres had changed since Mesteno had seen it last. The river still ran clear and cold among the rolling hills, hills covered with dry yellow grass in the lower valley and becoming pine-clad mountains as Mesteno rode north. There were farms in the valley floor now, connected by a broad wagon road that ran beside the river. The villages of the People and the ruins left by the Old Ones, that almost forgotten race from whom the Apache had taken the land long ago, had alike been turned under by the white man's plow.

Mesteno kept to the draws as he rode up the valley, but no one seemed very interested in him. Once he saw a dozen riders in the distance and turned away, fearing they were soldiers from Fort Bayard. When they came nearer, he saw that they were children, racing their mounts across the grassy slopes. He reined in, and they swept past so near he could hear their shouts.

The land was at peace. There were still the soldiers behind him, but they no longer mattered. It was only a few more miles.

He smiled when he saw the canyon. It, at least, was just as he

remembered it, a narrow cleft leading back toward the peaks where the last snowfall still lay. He turned the mare, letting her take her time up the gentle slope. There was no hurry. He reached the place where his village had been, thinking of the children he had seen in the valley. His own children had played here, and his sons had learned to hunt in these hills.

The memories of this place were all good. The bad ones came later. His daughter had married to a good man at Fort Stanton, and his wife had lived to see her grandson; but the sons were gone, the elder killed with Victorio at Tres Catillos, and the younger dead of whiskey and tuberculosis at San Carlos. Mesteno shook his head. There was no time for bitterness now. It was good to see the valley again.

He kicked the mare's skinny ribs and started forward just as the troopers broke from the trees a quarter mile away.

"As foragers! At the walk, forward!" The order burst from Jim Catron of its own accord. His men fell out in line to his left, Trent at the far end. "Carbines!"

Mesteno saw them coming and faced them, pulling back hard on the reins. The mare obediently pawed the air with her forefeet and Mesteno laughed aloud. He was back on his land now, with his warriors and his sons around him. This time no one would ever drive him off. He levered a shell into the Spencer's chamber and raised the rifle.

"Don't fire! Take him alive!" Jim swung in ahead of the line, wondering what the Apache was trying to do. They could take him if he turned to run, but somehow Jim knew he wasn't going to run. "Easy, there. Hold your position, O'Neil!"

The first shot went high, over his head and to the right. The mare tried to run, but Mesteno curbed her and worked the lever.

"Hold your fire! At the trot—"

Jim heard the shot and the sickening smack of its impact in the same instant. His horse screamed in agony and reared, blood spraying from its chest. He kicked desperately to clear the saddle as the animal toppled back on him, and the force of his

fall drove the air from his lungs. Through the black mist around him, he heard Trent's bellow.

"Bring him down!"

The four Springfields cracked together, and there was silence. Jim lifted himself on his elbows, shaking his head to clear it. The great weight of his horse lay on his right leg, pinning him to the ground.

"Easy, you clumsy apes!" Trent was there, sliding him clear with surprising strength as Frank and two of the privates strained at the limp animal. "That's good." Deftly, the little sergeant's fingers explored Jim's leg. "Nothin' broke. The lieutenant was mighty lucky. Be awful sore tomorrow, though."

Jim drew a deep breath. "Mesteno?" he asked.

"Dead, sir. I've seen it before. Those old 'Paches'll pick a spot and stand there, no matter what." He paused, looking at the ground. "I disobeyed the lieutenant's orders not to shoot."

"Oh?" Jim grinned fleetingly. "We'll overlook it this time, sergeant. You were right, if that's any consolation."

The smile vanished as he glanced up the hillside at Mesteno's sprawled figure. The mare lay a few yards away, whinnying in a puzzled way and trying to rise.

"Put that animal out of its misery. And detail two men to bury the Indian."

Trent sent a man running to the mare, then turned to Jim again. "Ah, lieutenant, the orders were to bring him back. Dead or alive."

"That's right. Preston will really make a fuss if we come in without him," Jim said, half to himself. He looked up grimly.

"Bury him, sergeant."

"Yes, sir. Brooks, Hickman, burial detail." Trent stepped up to Jim, his mouth widening into a grin.

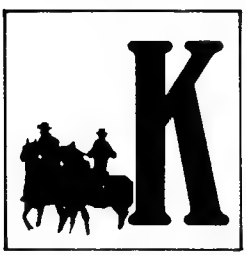
"If the lieutenant wants to try to get up, I'll lend a hand. Sir."

There was no malice in the word "sir" this time, only acceptance and a kind of understanding. Jim grinned in reply as he grasped the outstretched hand.

SALOON

A YOUNG MAN'S GAME

By Alfred Bouscal



eeping the Law is a young man's game!" These words wore a whetted edge. They cut to the back of Dougan's Livery where Sheriff Tate was sweet-talking his big bay team. That'd be McCulloch, Tate allowed. Him and his fool campaigning. Plain nonsense, for sure. McCulloch made himself heard some over the snorting, stomping, and squeaking of trappings out front. Pointing out how times were changing here in Cedars County, and a younger sheriff was needed to keep up.

His cornering townspeople here early morning was right smart. Only time they had for listening. And it gave them something to think on during the long hours atrail, something they could be turning over under their hats and pass on like it was their own idea to anybody they met.

A pretty good pitch McCulloch had, too, for having come up among cows. Signs of that danged Miss Mahoney, again. That pert young schoolmistress was getting under his hide in ways other than the usual one. This was glass clear.

Tate rump-rapped his pampered team back to their feeding, ambled through the livery, and crossed the broad trail coming into town to lean against the split rail fence, within hearing of that burr in his blanket (perched across the way on an idle spring wagon but out of nose-burning range of the dust). He'd inhaled his share since that day he hit here, face first and shoulder second, right about where the wagon stood. That day

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he'd forded Cedars Creek, his horse fast-walking with the promise of feed and trough, a handful of men were tying up in front of the Town Hall. Three more wearing stars unloaded from Dougan's saloon, alley distance from the livery, and headed their way.

That was when all guns came leather-free.

He remembered spurring for the wide open livery doors to miss the upcoming shower of lead. There wasn't enough luck for him and his horse. He went rolling in by himself.

"They can't do this," he'd thought out loud. The stable man took him for being sociable.

"Cain't, hell," that old codger came back. "Them Clansons are boss article again." He turned to look at Tate, now standing, and wiping his long-barrelled sidepiece off with his sleeve.

"Knowing them, you'd better put that away, stranger. And not mention that horse of yours."

Tate's cold gray eyes couldn't see it that way. First sight of this valley from the divide that morning had named it home. And that's how it was going to be, dammit, if he had to keep house himself.

Tate had stepped out of the livery and eyed the remaining wild bunch. They were taken up with their two cashed-in partners, yet not ignoring the slow-gathering locals for any lead-backed objection.

"Keep coming, Clansons!" Tate roared. All eyes turned on him, standing broad-legged at the start of Main Street. Everyone took cover again, except the outlaws. Their fast guns weren't made for that range. They closed on in.

Clanson lead started going by. Tate pulled two well-aimed shots off at arm's length. The leftover runner reversed his feet. Tate pulled another shot off at those spraddle legs, and number three hit the dirt, but kept going on hands and knees, like a gun-shy pup, losing himself behind the frittering horse legs light-footed from all this ruckus.

He showed up again, bent over a tall roan's withers. Tate cracked his leftover caps at its hooves. No harm letting one go

to spread the word here peace was going to be preserved.

The saloon doors parted again and a short, fat bartender poured out.

"Don't shoot, stranger!" he yelped in alarm. Tate's left hand had whipped his quick-draw belly gun from inside the right wing of his bull-thick leather vest.

"Name's Dougan," that beet-faced character blurted, leaving no doubt the twin establishments bearing his name gave it some authority. Tate put his hardware away. Dougan pulled a star from under his overly used apron and pinned it to Tate's vest. He grabbed Tate's hand, then, to cinch the deal, asking, "What name would you be going by, sheriff?"

Tate's left hand caught his cuff to buff up the new star's silver brightness. The start of a solid habit. He caught himself buffing the same star, now, still pinned to that lifelasting garment.

His eyes drifted to the saloon. The gone-warped condition of that false front, even parting from the alley side, backed up McCulloch's pitch. Tate had been sheriff a mighty long time.

"Up-to-date living takes up-to-date ways!" McCulloch stretched out his arm to point with pride at the newly finished section of the county seat. The young campaigner was getting through to him, again. It was the old Town Hall and sheriff's office in the way of the other wing which had prompted McCulloch's running.

Tate had set Dougan and the other supervisors straight on his views of this subject at their last meeting. "Tear down the old Town Hall," he'd told them. "It's nothing but a rat's nest anymore. But don't come up to my office for anything but protection while I am the law." Then Miss Mahoney took over. Her, and all her learning. She told a long, sad story; something about planting the three Rs. And how if Cedars County wasn't cultivated right they'd better not count on a harvest at all. The nose blowing that went on!

"What's more," McCulloch said—and stopped. Hooves splashed in the creek. A lone rider came over the bank, his

morning shadow moving swiftly uptrail to mix with the stilled crowd. The horses quit champing the chill off their bits, sensing the mood of that moment. Men were eyeing each other, knowingly. It wasn't the likes of a right-purposed pilgrim to do his traveling of a night.

Tate tilted his head, hat brim into the sun, to better size up this peanut riding in. His mind whirred like a windmill, flitting through the notices back on his desk, those makeups on the wanted ones habit taught him to carry in his head.

Try as he might, no one was that small. The big L.S. on his saddle bag found no place, neither. But, Tate noted as the other rode by, here was one to fit the pattern. It showed in the difference between his travel-bent togs and the neatness of his elbow-greased holsters.

He was empty-faced, with eyes so light they couldn't be accused of looking anyplace. But they took in such details as who sported the star. And the type of gun carried. Tate caught him smirking at the old long barrel tied to his right hip, for years now used as a can roller to entertain kids rather than serious shooting.

The stranger made straight for the saloon and reined back for lack of a hitchpost. Dougan wasn't the one to have his livery shortchanged with horses tied in the street.

The strange livewire eased off with a smooth spring motion, rapped his horse on the rump, and breathed a flat, "Leave him saddled," to the livery boy in a voice not used to talking. He walked back across the alley, paused just short of the swinging doors, then slid through fast with a side-stepping motion so as not to be framed in the light.

Such action sent Tate back to his office, fast, to check the notices on his table top desk. At least his memory could still hold office. It wasn't right, a drifter like that on the float, not wanted for wrong doing something.

He rocked his Douglas chair back against the wall, going through past hearsay to pin this wanderer down. The school bell brought him out of that daydream world. He went to the

door and looked up Main Street. It was full of running kids and their yapping dogs. Used to be a regular chore working the alleys, creek, and nearby woods rounding up those dodging due learning under the old taskmaster. When Miss Mahoney was brought in, they somehow took to getting to school by themselves.

Tate crossed the office and went into his private quarters. He opened the corner closet door. His scraggly likeness frowned back at him from the full-length mirror inside.

He backed off and let his right elbow rest on his dresser, his left thumb hanging lightly in his waistband—a pose which would tell any bar-bound renegade looking for an awkward draw of that ancient sidepiece he'd better be thinking of something else.

"Now!" he cued. His fingers jumped. The belly gun rocked up, clearing his vest, and leveled out with the hammer rolled back as it had done in thousands of practice sessions.

Tate froze for a full minute. His wrinkles cut deeper. "Blamed fool," he muttered. "Camped on this job so long that old man in the mirror beat you." He jammed the belly gun back in its holster, hearing hurried steps coming down the wooden walk out front.

He moseyed back into the working part of his office, mulling over the slowness which had even taken over his walking. He'd barely got seated again in that Buddy Douglas chair when Dougan puffed in.

"Morning, Dougan," Tate greeted, his voice on edge with the other's pace. "Something wrong?"

"Ah-h-h, morning, Sheriff," Dougan hedged. "Just a piece of your mail." He looked down at the paper in his shaking hand. "Got stuck in the mail sack and went on through," he added. "Old Grant just got back with it this morning."

Tate relaxed, and rocked back. "I'd say delivering mail with the 'due celerity' called for in your Postal Service contract means it should get here on time," he jibed. "I think one of those dictionary books would back me up. So would your star

boarder, Miss Mahoney."

"Right sorry," Dougan came back. "We know Grant's eyes are no good, close. But he's prided himself with handling that coach so long . . . ."

"Be that as it may," Tate preached, "time has come when handling the ribbons isn't all there is to staging. Nor playing coyote with Indians." He banged his chair back down and reached across his desk to relieve Dougan of the letter.

Tate hand flattened the wrinkled paper. "Wanted," he read. "Better dead. Luke Stratton." He let off a low whistle. The description, pint size and near white eyes, fit the stranger close as his skin. His voice went off pitch as he read, "Wanted for provoking and gunning down a pair of deputy Marshals," at the bottom.

Tate looked up.

"I've put you in a rough spot," Dougan apologized again.

"It'll level out," Tate soothed. "I could have used this earlier, that's all."

"Like McCulloch said," Dougan agreed. "He wondered why you hadn't called Luke at your best distance this morning."

Tate stiffened in his chair. "How did McCulloch get word of this?"

Dougan fidgeted, and took a step back. "I called him in, that's how. Like you just got through saying . . . like everybody's saying . . . time going by the way it has . . . ."

"Enough mush-mouthing, Dougan," Tate cut him off. "What's cropped up under your hat?"

Dougan started shaking. "Your life, that's what," he said. "You're not up to going into tight quarters with such as him. Why . . ." he paused to snap his fingers, "he'd drop you just like that." Dougan pulled a bandana from his hind pocket and mopped his forehead. "So I called in McCulloch," he went on. "He accepted, with your say-so, of course. He asked me to get him three deputy badges."

Tate stood up to a height he hadn't felt in years. Dougan noticed, and took another step back.

"When I need help," Tate bristled, "I'll do the troubling for it."

"Now don't bow your neck," Dougan shot back. "We don't want . . . ."

Tate was around the desk with all the speed he could get up. Dougan, much quicker, made the street. "I'm the law in Cedars County," Tate blasted after him. "And I'll jail anybody who butts in!"

Dougan fast-stepped back up into town. Tate stopped short on the walk. He noticed, then, how the townsfolk had gathered in bunches. And how his voice had tripped them into giving him side eye looks, like they wanted to hang onto his image without letting him in.

He took to the street with an extra long stride, heading askew toward the saloon. His left hand caught his cuff to polish his star. "False front," he muttered, looking narrow-eyed at that time-worn building. He then bore toward the livery.

Some unusual carousing down by the creek stopped Tate short of the livery door. He made for the corner and looked out on Miss Mahoney with a gathering of small fry. "Nature study," he grunted. Teach 'em to tally! he wanted to yell. But he'd caused too much ruckus, already. He hoofed back in through the livery leaving a thick silence to smother the town.

The telltale groan of a not lately used wagon roughed up the air again. It creaked out the alley between the livery and the saloon. Tate stood in back, legs spread wide, his hands holding a Texas-size loop. The other end of the heavy rope was tied to the rear axle. As he came up alongside the saloon's false front, he tossed the loop over its projecting corner.

Two steps put him up to the seat. He grabbed up the slack reins. His right hand slipped back to pop the trailing ends over his big bay team in time with his back-scratching, "Ha-a-a!"

The bays hit their collars as Tate cleared to the street in a broad, heel-battering jump. The pain was lost catching sight of Miss Mahoney and her bug-eyed brood, coming uptrail from the creek. They were all pushing to get under her wing.

Tate turned back towards the saloon and saw the cause for their concern. His wagon had jumped hat high in the air. It was flipping over now, to fall on its back as the false front tore loose with a groan.

"Whoa-a-a!" Tate roared, before his precious bays got tangled in the traces, his voice clipped short by the splintering crash of the false front flopping down in the street.

The noise snowballed as the building swayed, screeching a weird sigh of relief. The tall back bar mirror shattered down around spewing bottles. Boots belonging to those who had gathered to witness firsthand action were stomping over chairs, tables, and each other trying to get where it wasn't.

Not so with that feisty McCulloch, riding self-appointed herd on the outlaw from the far end of the bar. Nor with that unwelcome stranger sitting off to the left. His type couldn't live to be a thorn in man's side if they saw meaning in words like panic.

Tate had Luke by the short hair, thanks to the dust swooshed out from under the wall. He could see out of that boiling cloud far better than Luke could see in. But cover wasn't part of the code he upheld. The unwritten law of those who kept it allowed the gunman to go first.

"You're wanted, Luke," Sheriff Tate bawled. The dust settled down around him. Luke bounced out of his seat, pausing for a second, uncertain with swapping lead at that distance. The lust that made him killer had no patience with that kind of thinking. His hands went for his tied down holsters with the speed of the snake he was.

Tate found his big pistol grip about the time Luke's first shot went off. Lightning fast, the outlaw was, but short and wide of collected shooting. Tate's long barrel cleared leather as he counted Luke's number two. Again low, but closing in, digging dirt down by his right boot. His thumb rolled the hammer back and the front sight was coming up. He didn't hear Luke's third shot. It slammed the hideout gun up under his right ribs. Daylight went with it.

Tate staggered back. His gun arm wilted. He banged into the rail fence and hung there by his elbows. His mind gave way to a soft thought. Those he'd put away hadn't suffered any.

His elbows took on more weight. His knees started buckling.

A high-pitched voice reached him. "Stand up, Sheriff Tate!" it ordered. Just like that danged Miss Mahoney, wanting the kids to learn sheriffs never hit the dirt.

Tate shook his head and that empty gray world gathered into colored blobs. One showed up strong. It had to be Luke, coming fast at him, out of the darkest hole.

Tate's left hand joined his right. Together, they kicked the pistol off out front. Along with its blast, Luke's fourth shot buried itself in the top rail alongside his left ear.

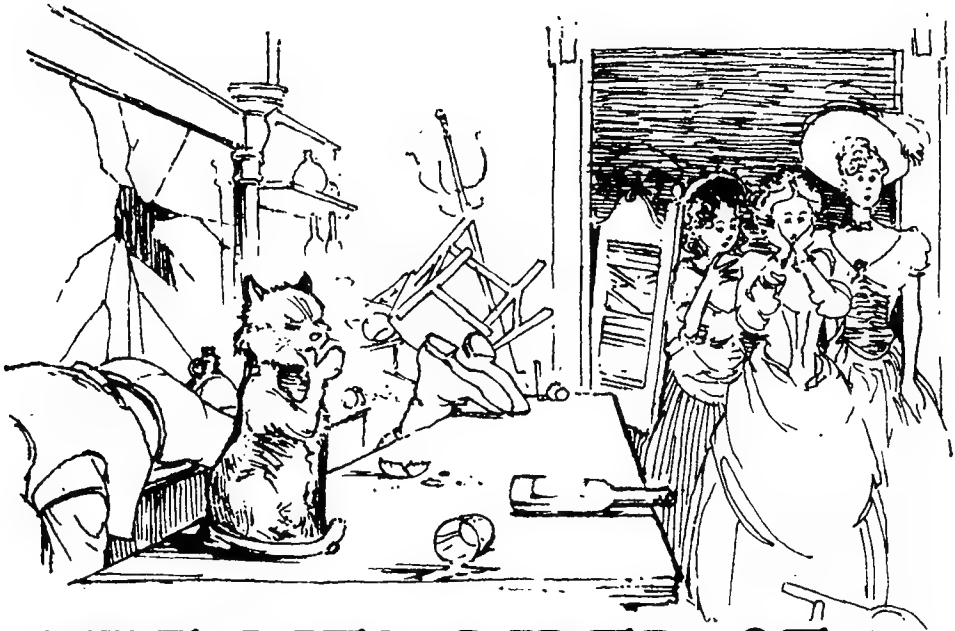
The log jumped and whacked him on the back of his neck. Its blow cleared him. He lined up on Luke again . . . Luke slumped away below his sights, stumbling clear of the flattened wall, curling up in the dirt around those guns he would use no more.

The townspeople swarmed down Main Street. Tate took over first comers. "Right my wagon," he ordered, coiling up his rope. He looked over his shoulder at the stable boy. "You, Bucketmouth, go dust off Black Maria. And polish the harness with the plumes on it."

Tate boarded his wagon. Luke's body was loaded behind. He pulled his bays around to head down the alley, but had to stop. Miss Mahoney had gotten hold of McCulloch's arm. They stood in the open face of the saloon like it was a big city stage. She was working a speech over in her mind. Tate could see it in her eyes. It was going to be pretty and powerful, he knew, pointing straight at him with pride.

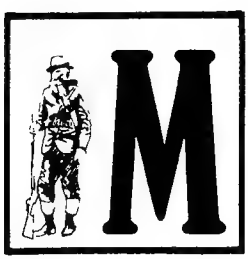
Tate's left hand came up, and without grabbing his cuff his bony fingers closed around the star. He ripped it off and flipped it to McCulloch.

Miss Mahoney lifted her face again. Her lips had petrified into an "O." Tate slapped the reins at his bays to cover up a chuckle. For once, he'd had the last word.



THE PIED PIPER OF LARRABEE GULCH

By James Mathers



Mordecai Piper Malloy cussed his mules as they stood on the muddy bank of Larrabee Creek, now at flood. The rain was not easing any, it never does in the Boise Basin in late fall, and Piper knew that since his team would never cross a flooded creek he would have to haul his whiskey, flour and spuds up and around Hunter's Ridge.

"In the God Damned dead of NIGHT in the God Damned dead of WINTER!" he exploded.

Piper hauled supplies to four gold camps in the Basin, and Larrabee Gulch was far and away the roughest trip. When gold was discovered in the gulch in '62, the price of commodities went sky high. Flour was $15.00 a hundred pound sack, and

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eggs had gone to $3.00 a dozen. Piper had given up on eggs for the gulch. The trip was so bad he never had been able to arrive with more than twenty percent of his load unbroken. But potatoes got him a dollar to a dollar two-bits each, and the wiry little forty-year-old Irishman from the streets of New York knew that he could always turn a good profit on potatoes.

"I don't care if they're green with rot," he thought as he hauled his team up toward the ridge. "I'm holdin' out for a buck a spud. Hell, those scroungers'll eat anything anyway."

And he was a good teamster. Wasn't anybody could handle a four-up team of mules like old Piper. He had wrapped his long-whip around his lead mule's nose and twisted the animal's snout till it screamed with pain. It was the only way he could get the brute to move on the slippery creek bank. Even at one-hundred forty pounds, Piper was considered the best mule skinner in Boise. And not because of his brutality—Christ, all skinners beat

their mules! He was the best because he loved his team, and the animals felt it and they always came through for him.

"MOVE you scabby son-of-a-bitch," growled Piper.

"Rrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeee—Haw!" screamed the mule.

"Aw shit! All you ever done all your life is beller at me!" Piper screamed back. "Never has done you no good and it ain't gonna do you no good now, so MOVE!"

They moved, and as Piper slogged and hauled up the ridge, his thoughts turned to Jeannie.

"Damned old whore. Worse than these here mules," he muttered.

Jeannie O'Brien was the number one madame in Larrabee Gulch, and she loved Piper Malloy. She had found his strength and determination equal to hers years ago back in Boise where they had first met. And Jeannie was the only one for Piper. Ten years now he had come to her and her alone. Wherever Jeannie went, sooner or later Piper would appear, dirty and grumbling, and Jeannie knew he adored her. But being a businesswoman she couldn't see how the old skinner could offer her anything more than a broken-down wagon for a home and four mangy mules for kitchen companions.

"She's gettin' old and I'll wait her out, by God," Piper said to the mud. "But God Damn she's so pretty there gotta be ten years on her yet." Then he slipped in the mud and hurt his knee bad, and the mules let the wagon slide back toward the creek. One of the wheels snagged on a strong young aspen and held, and Piper found himself tangled under the legs of the first two animals. But the skinner knew his mules would die before they stood on him, so he grabbed a giant hind leg and pulled himself out.

"Good lads!" he rasped, and he stroked the lead mule's rump. Then with inbred Celt determination, Piper dismissed the pain, found more stable ground, checked out the team, and cussed them on up toward Hunter's Ridge.

Business in Jeannie's whorehouse was as dead as the winter. Seven ladies sat in the parlor, dressed for customers, and bored

or preoccupied with their own thoughts. The raging of the storm outside the old house, and the tick-ticking of an ancient grandfather clock were the only sounds to be heard in the ornate sitting room.

Suddenly, Sarah, a sixteen-year-old miner's daughter-turned-whore, jerked her head toward the grandfather clock at the distinct sound of rustling from that quarter.

Deep Doe, a slim, middle-aged Nez Perce squaw, stared intently at the origin of the new sound.

Fat Mary, Jennie's newest girl in from Denver, and better days, shuddered at the rustling and brought her stubby little legs up under her.

Virginia, twenty-six and uncommonly pretty for a girl in her profession, suddenly let out an ear-splitting scream sounding the general alarm.

Over at the hanging-bead doorway leading back to the kitchen, a shotgun barrel appeared followed by its bearer, Jeannie O'Brien, a handsome red-headed woman in her mid-forties.

"Those Goddamned rats!" And an explosion shook the room.

The BOOM of the .44 in the hands of Dueces Morgan, a card sharp down on his luck, did not faze the other barroom patrons in the least.

"Got the bugger."

At the large card table in the middle of the saloon sat four miners and Dueces. He carefully wiped the barrel of the Army Colt with a grimy but frilly handkerchief.

"C'mon Dueces, you gonna bet your hand or shoot rats?" grumbled one of the players.

"Can't stand the filthy beasts," replied Morgan to no one in particular. "Ten dollars, gentlemen."

Over at the high, rough-plank bench which served as the bar, Piper Malloy, in poncho and skins and just in from the storm, banged down a gold coin.

"Whiskey, Bobo." He looked up at the bear of a man who owned the bar and who all the miners referred to as "Bobo."

"Have a good trip, Piper?" Bobo rumbled as he shoved a glass of dirty brown rye at the shipper.

"Naw! Larrabee Creek is plumb flooded, and my damn mules won't for nothin' cross a flooded creek." He drank the swill and pushed the chipped glass back at Bobo who immediately refilled it.

"Had to go clear around Hunter's Ridge. Don't know why I come to this Godforsaken camp anyhow! If it wasn't for Jeannie, you groundhogs could get your whiskey from hell."

On "hell" another BOOM shattered the steamy barroom air causing Piper to knock over his glass. Down at the far end of the plank a smiling man with a smoking rifle in his hand called out in a Liverpool accent:

"That's five quid you owe me, Mendez. Blew the bloody blighter clean in two!"

"Worth every peso," approved a tall, lean and mustachioed figure who looked more snake than man. He kicked the remains of the huge rat into a corner, dug out the gold coins and tossed them at the shooter.

"Rats make my skin to crawl!" he hissed.

Piper held out the empty glass and Bobo refilled it.

"Can't you boys do something about these rats? They're gettin' big as coyotes."

"Nope," replied the bored innkeeper. "They breed faster than you can kill 'em. Besides I like 'em. They give the boys something to do . . . keeps them from killing each other."

Piper tossed down the rotgut.

"I'm off to see Jeannie. I'll be leaving at dawn, Bobo. Larrabee's got his goods and your whiskey's in the wagon. If it's still there in the morning, I'm taking it with me."

"If you love that old whore so much Piper, why don't you marry her?" asked Bobo, taking a shot for himself.

"Tried!" laughed Piper. "She won't have me." He walked to the door. "Jeannie's got seven gals in her crib. All I got is four old broken-down mules. Haw!" He pushed out into the storm and a resounding BOOM spooked the mules.

"Damn rats!" he snorted.

"Jeannie! Jeannie, it's me, honey! Piper! Piper Malloy . . ." he stood in the downpour banging on the old oak door.

At the commotion, all the girls rushed to the cut glass window in the door and peered out into the night.

"Aw hell! It's only Piper Malloy . . ." whined Virginia. "That dirty old shipper."

Piper, standing in his own puddle, continued to pound the door as the girls squinted out at him. He saw Jeannie, a big warm smile on her face, push through the girls and open the door. She pulled him inside.

"Damn, Jeannie! A man could drown out here time it takes you to let a man in. Business so good you can let customers die of the pneumony waitin' in line?"

"Get in here and get these wet things off!" ordered Jeannie. "Peg. Get Piper some whiskey."

The storm had abated somewhat and the girls were again bored and silent. They sat about the parlor yawning and scratching themselves while Piper, in his union suit and hat, sat stiffly erect on a settee sipping his whiskey.

"Have a good trip Piper?" asked Jeannie, filling his half-empty glass.

"Mules acted up some down at Larrabee Creek . . ." replied Piper, then another lapse into silence.

"Damn Jeannie!" he exploded. Then he looked around, embarrassed at his language. "Uh . . . sorry, ladies." No one responded. Finally:

"Jeannie, I'm tired! Can't we go on up to bed?"

"May as well," replied Jeannie. "There's no business tonight, the rain and all." They rose. "You girls wait for the stragglers now, here? I don't want to find any of you asleep." And she disappeared through the hanging beads followed by a chorus of groans. Piper stopped at the doorway and tipped his hat to the ladies, then turned and scampered after his love.

Dawn in Larrabee Gulch after a heavy rainfall is one of the most beautiful sights on earth. A few birds chattered through

the rising mist, and a coyote yapped at some unknown intruder up on Hunter's Ridge. Up in Jeannie's bedroom the first light had discovered a porcelain wash basin and its matching pitcher. Then the sun's rays chased a furry creature across the room. He knocked over one of Piper's boots in his mad dash for the darkness of an open wardrobe.

"Jeannie? That you?" came a muffled voice.

"Mmmmm . . ." said a noise from deep inside the featherbed.

"That you, Jeannie?"

"Morning Piper . . . my Piper . . ."

The featherbed moved slightly as two figures came together. Then:

"No honey. It's just the rats."

The movement of the comforter stopped for a moment or two, then Piper bolted upright directly into a morning ray.

"RATS?" He looked nervously around the room, pulling the big quilt up around his shoulders. Then he burrowed down and uncovered a riot of red hair.

"Rats? Good GOD Jeannie, they here too?"

Jeannie snuggled back into the warm softness, pulling Piper with her.

"Piper? Piper, why aren't you rich?"

"How can you stand them?" Piper snarled, climbing up for air. "In your bedroom?"

"Piper honey? Couldn't you be just a little more ambitious?" said the husky voice. "Maybe buy another wagon or two? Hire some drivers?"

"You gotta DO something about these rats!" he countered. "No wonder business is slow, your crib's full of RATS!"

"You know honey . . . I'd marry you if . . ."

"I could bring you some good strong poison, maybe . . ." interrupted Piper.

"I might even finance another wagon . . ."

"Or maybe a cat . . ."

". . . and the mules, too."

"A cat. Cats!" He turned to the red hair peeking out from

under the featherbed. "CATS, Jeannie." Then he looked out the window at the morning. "Cats, cats and more CATS!"

"Piper . . ." said the red hair, a little edge in the voice.

"Cats, honey!" Piper rasped, pawing at the comforter and revealing Jeannie's cold glare. He paused a second, then jumped out of the big brass bed and began dancing around the room in the full glow of the morning sunshine.

"Cats . . . cats oh cats . . . kitty cats . . ." he sang, and Jeannie watched in cold silence as the skinny little union-suited mule-skinner jumped on and off the bed and around the frilly room. Then he landed astride her on his knees, his eyes bright as blue gas flame.

"Jeannie, Jeannie, Jeannie! Shoshone's full of cats. I could buy 'em for . . . say anywhere from ten cents to a dollar! I'll bring 'em here by the wagon load . . . sell 'em for ten . . . no TWENTY dollars . . . see what the traffic will bear . . . "

Jeannie's cold, green-eyed glare burned into his stubbled face.

"Gotta get cages. And food. Cat food! Sell old gizzards and tripe for a dollar a pound!" Then he became aware of her eyes and slowly kneeled his way backwards toward the end of the bed.

"Don't you SEE, honey? We'll make a fortune!"

Jeannie pulled herself up and followed Piper's face, nose-to-nose, as he backed away.

"The girls! They don't have any friends! Jeannie?" he continued. "I'll buy Fat Mary a big old yellow cat . . . and Peg! A striped cat for Peg. And Deep Doe gets a big BLACK cat with yellow eyes . . . Jeannie?"

"Piper Malloy . . . " came the snarl. "Piper Malloy, you get out of here Piper Malloy . . ." Her voice was even and threatening.

"And for you, honey! For you I'll get the biggest, softest, fluffiest, prettiest cat you EVER saw!" he whined as he backed off the bed and picked up his boots.

". . . out of here, Piper . . . "

"With big beautiful green eyes, just like yours, honey . . . "

". . . this instant Piper Malloy . . ."

". . . and we'll be rich, honey . . ."

". . . and don't EVER come back here . . . "

"RICH, honey . . ." he edged backwards toward the bedroom door.

". . . without any money or you can SLEEP IN YOUR WAGON WITH YOUR GOD DAMNED MULES!"

". . . rich, and we'll be married . . ."

In one smooth arc Jeannie's arm swung down beside the bed, picked up the half-full chamber pot and threw it at Piper who happily dodged it at the now open door. It banged against the edge of the door showering the laughing shipper, and he fell backward through the frame.

"And you won't have to work NO MORE!"

"OUT, OUT, OUT!" she screamed as the little figure tumbled down the stairs.

"CATS, honey!" she heard him yell to her. "Beautiful, furry, rat-eating CATS!"

Jeannie found herself kneeling on the featherbed in a red-headed rage in the now quiet golden morning. She squeezed her eyes shut, gritted her teeth, shook her head back and forth and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"PIPERRRRRRRRR. . ."

"Bang!" went a door somewhere deep in the house. Then silence. Jeannie fell back on her rump and began to smile at the open bedroom door.

"Cats," she chuckled. "That's a hell of an idea!" She plopped back down on the quilts, her red hair flooding the yellow pillow slip.

"I'm gonna get that clever little son-of-a-bitch!" And she began to laugh.

Three large, ugly rats nibbled on a pile of dried horse dung in the still quiet of the morning at the edge of town. A mule-skinner yell pierced the pastoral serenity sending the creatures flying in three directions. Then Piper's mules sent the dung to

eternity and the wagon retreated from Larrabee Gulch with a whooping Piper at the reins. When the quiet returned, the rats sneaked back to hunt for the remains of their breakfast.

Shoshone was a bustling little town perched on a brand new railroad spur. A swift creek paralleled the tracks next to which stood Piper Malloy's wagon and four scraggly mules. An equally scraggly little lad of ten or so hunkered with Piper on the ties, deep in serious conversation. Two other dirty-faced boys hung back suspiciously.

"I can use all the cats you can find. Pay twenty-five cents on delivery. And cages and baskets . . . dime-a-piece for cages and baskets that'll hold a cat!"

The boy nodded up at Piper through squinty eyes . . . two conspirators with a common purpose. The other boys shuffled their feet nervously nearby.

"I gotta have 'em fast, so get movin'."

The boy ran to his friends and displayed a shiny new quarter under their incredulous noses, and Piper rose to his feet, a scroungy yellow cat hanging from his fist.

"Aye, my fine furry friend," he said to the catatonic cat. "You're my first step on the road to riches!"

The boys ran off down the tracks and Piper gazed after them.

"Fine lads. Yes sir! Fine lads, indeed!"

Piper sipped his beer slowly, glancing from time to time at a large Tom snoring on the end of the bar. The bartender, a huge, mean-looking, full-bearded man stood wiping his dirty shot-glasses with a dirty rag. He glared at Piper.

"How much you want for that there mangy cat, Roy?"

"Ain't for sale," came the gruff reply.

"Give a dollar for him . . ."

"I said he ain't for sale."

Piper wiped his mouth with his sleeve and gave a great sigh.

"It's my Maw, Roy . . . poor old lady lost her pet cat last week. Poor old lady." He took another sip. "Her only companion since my old man got killed by Indians. Looked just

like that there mangy old cat."

"Your old man?"

"No . . . the CAT, Roy! The one that got killed last week. Poor old lady . . ."

Roy walked slowly over to Piper and leaned his arm on the bar.

"I know you, Malloy," he started, slow and mean. "I know you ain't got any old lady, and I know you been beggin', borrowin' and stealin' cats all over town. Now I don't know what you're up to, but I do know that if you put one hand on old Tom there, I'll break it off you!"

"Just askin', Roy, just askin'!" Piper backed off quickly. Then he stared straight ahead and finished his beer.

"Just askin' . . ." he complained to himself.

There were six, maybe seven kittens in the old shoe box.

"Give a buck for the lot," said Piper, frowning down at the furry little balls.

"You said twenty-five cents each," complained the tow-headed kid.

Piper and the kid were crouched in the shade of an old livery stable next to Roy's Saloon.

"That's right, boy, but these ain't cats. They are kittens. Won't do me no good till they're full growed!" said Piper, shaking his head back and forth. "And I gotta feed 'em and care for 'em till then!"

"They be seven cats here, Mr. Malloy. Come to one dollar and seventy-five cents," said the lad, a "no-deal" look on his face.

Piper looked at the kid a long time. Then, with admiration:

"You drive a hard bargain, boy." He dug out the money and handed it to the kid accompanied by a wide Irish grin. "Kittens is fine. I'll take all you can get."

"What a God awful smell!" grumbled Piper as he tried to make out what the Chinese were yammering about. The huge black pot full of shirts, pants and underwear was boiling on an open fire in the back of the laundry tent. The smell of opium

and the dirty laundry was almost too much to bear, and the animated Chinese were going to go on and on unless Piper put an end to it.

"Hold it! HOLD IT!" he shouted. The Chinese fell silent and stared at the mule skinner.

"I probably smell just as bad to them," he chuckled to himself. The Chinese bowed and nodded to him and to each other.

"Now! You gimmee cattee . . ." he began, gesturing at the sleek cross-eyed Siamese cleaning herself on an overturned wooden tub ". . . and I payee youee twenty-five centee!" he concluded with a flourish, holding out the coin and reaching for the cat. As Piper moved toward the preoccupied Siamese, all the Chinese became highly agitated and began chattering in unison.

"Wait a minute. WAIT A MINUTE . . . here!" And suddenly there was dead silence. The cross-eyed cat looked up at Piper who couldn't tell if the animal was looking at him or some one behind him. He involuntarily glanced back over his shoulder, then quickly shook his head in disgust.

"Damned cross-eyed beast!" he muttered. The Chinese giggled.

"Now," said Piper. "Now then . . . that's better. Now, you-ee give me kittee . . ." He paused. It looked like the Chinese seemed to understand. He continued ". . . and I give-ee you-ee chop chop . . . mon-ee!" He held out the coin.

"No, Mr. Malloy," said the youngest Chinese in perfect English. "You-ee givee me TWO DOLLARS in United States currency, and Ho-Toi, there, becomes your property, to do with as you see fit. You sav-ee?" he asked with a broad smile.

Piper stared at the number one Chinese for a full minute in appreciative awe. Then nodding silently, he pulled out two silver dollars and respectfully handed them to the young man.

"Thank you, thank you very much," Piper muttered. He picked up the placid cat and backed out of the shed, bowing. Outside he held up the cat and spoke to it.

"That's the best I seen. The best I EVER seen!"

The cat stared back and Piper rejected a gnawing urge to look behind him.

The panorama of the Boise Basin defies description. The magic of that land seeped deep into the Pyrenees Mountains and drew forth the rugged Basque who does not to this day care to bastardize his blood with the strain of outsiders. He was there in the foothills of the mighty Sawtooth, tending his sheep on the very morning that Piper Malloy split the crisp air with his raucous mule skinner cry.

"Heeeeeeeeee . . . Yaaaaaaaaa . . .Muuuuuuuuuule . . . Heeee eeeeee . . .Yaaaaaawwwwwwwwww . . ."

Two other silent figures, on horseback, watched the dust trail far below and heard the ancient sound of men who drive beasts.

"Here she comes, Dave!"

"Hold it, Cole," said the second, steadying his mount. "That ain't the Shoshone stage!"

"Sure enough ain't," replied Cole after a couple of confused moments. "Let's get her anyhow. C'mon!" And the two highwaymen spurred their horses down the trail.

"Stand and deliver!" cried Cole after he had pulled up Piper's lead mule.

Piper dropped the reins, rose to his feet and put his hands in the air.

"Ain't got but three dollars boys," he stated earnestly. "You're welcome to it!"

"Check the wagon, Dave," ordered Cole.

Dave rode to the rear of Piper's wagon and peered in through the canvas flap at one-hundred eighty-four squawling cats. Then he shouted back at the bandit leader.

"Ain't nothin' back here but a bunch of cats, Cole."

Cole moved his mount back and forth a few times squinting menacingly at Piper. Finally he replied.

"What's that you say, Dave?"

"I SAID, there ain't nothin' in this here shipper's wagon but a bunch of cats!"

Cole walked his horse over to the buckboard and glared up at Piper. He looked the scrawny mule skinner up and down. Then up and down again. Then he made his decision.

"Right! Okay, Dave. Get back up here!" Then he rasped at the trembling shipper.

"All right, mister. You get on outta here. Now! MOVE it!"

Piper plopped back down on the buckboard and yelled his mules out, and the wagon banged on up the trail. Cole and Dave watched the mule skinner's dust in silence until it settled.

"Cole?" asked his puzzled partner. "What do you suppose that dirty old skinner's doin' with all them cats?"

Cole, the older and wiser leader scowled at his greener brother renegade.

"You don't know the answer to that, Dave, ain't no use in me even tellin' you!" And he chick-chicked his chestnut back up toward the foothills with Dave following in silent admiration.

The four mules stood dumbly watching the still spinning wagon wheels, amazed to see their load in such an unusual position.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty . . ." came a muffled complaint, and one of the mules cocked a floppy ear in the direction of his master's voice.

Under a nearby bush crawled Piper, cat in one hand, reaching gingerly for another, spitting feline.

"Here kitty, kitty . . . here kitty kitty . . . COME HERE YOU GOD DAMNED SCROUNGY BUGGER!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhh . . ." spit the scroungy bugger.

By late afternoon Piper had managed to collect the cats and right the wagon, and, exhausted, he decided to spend the night in back with the cats. Then he shuddered at the thought.

"Think maybe better stay out here with the mules," he muttered. "Make the gulch in the morning . . ." He looked down at the bloody scratches covering his hands and arms ". . . if the buggers don't get loose and eat me in the night!"

"BOOM!" said Bobo's Saloon as Piper drove his team by Jeannie's whorehouse. He waved up to the beautiful redhead leaning out of her second floor window.

"Jeannie! Jeannie!" yelled Piper.

"BOOM!" replied Bobo's.

"Who's that, Jeannie?" asked Virginia from inside the room.

"That?" replied Jeannie. "Why, that's Piper Malloy!" And she blew a kiss at her teamster.

"That's Piper Malloy. Soon to be the richest man in Larrabee Gulch!"

Virginia peered down over Jeannie's shoulder and into the street.

"You been drinkin' this early Jeannie?" she asked. And they both watched as Piper grinned back over his shoulder, holding up a big fluffy white Persian cat.

Mendez had that old feeling. Like good whiskey and soft dark flesh on a warm Vera Cruz night. Only this night it was three Queens and a pair of tens. He squinted over at Dueces Morgan. No, by Jesus Mary! He wasn't going to give himself away to that bastard Morgan. Not THIS time!

Dueces squinted back. He held two treys, a five, a six and a Jack.

"That's a fifty dollar raise to you, Mendez."

There was over two hundred in the pot and everyone in Bob's crowded around.

"I got you thees time, Morgan . . . you ain't to bluff me thees time!" And Mendez counted his money, slowly.

"Your fifty . . ." He dropped the gold in the pot, coin by coin. ". . . and . . . to raise you . . . one hundred!" And that cleaned him out. He leered at Morgan, then wiped his wet mouth with the back of his grimy hand.

Dueces raised his eyebrows at Mendez. Then he looked down at the gold. Then he studied his bust-out. Finally:

"Hate to do this to you, Mendez . . ." He locked into Mendez's tiny, black, snake eyes.

"Your hundred . . . and . . ." Dueces reached down beside

him to the floor not taking his eyes of Mendez for an instant. He brought up his sleek Siamese and dropped her onto the heaping stack of gold.

". . . ELOISE!"

A low rumble of awe came from the crowd of onlookers.

Mendez was visibly shaken. Beads of sweat popped from his brow. He stared at Eloise . . . then, slowly he looked up at Morgan. His hands began to tremble. Finally he looked down to the floor beside him. There, tied to his chair with a piece of string, sat Tony, a pretty little yellow alley cat. Tony looked up at Mendez, puzzled, his little head cocked to the left.

"Meaoww?" asked Tony.

Mendez turned back to Dueces, hate burning in his guts.

"DAMN your eyes, Morgan!"

Dueces leered back at Mendez, then he leaned on his elbow, smiled and lit up a thin, black cigar.

"Your bet, Mendez."

Mendez wiped his brow, stared at his full house, then threw it into the pot. He rose to his feet, scooped up Tony, kicked over his chair and stumbled to the bar. Dueces turned up his threes and grinned at Eloise.

"Nice going, sweetheart!"

"Mrrrrrrrr . . ." purred the cross-eyed cat, looking back at her new lover. Morgan hesitated, frowned and looked back over his shoulder, then back to Eloise.

"Damn YOUR eyes!" he whispered, as he raked in the gold.

Mendez dropped Tony on the bar and stroked his neck. Five other placer miners leaned against the heavy plank, each one holding some kind of alley cat. Behind Bobo on the back bar stood a box with a sign:

"KITS – 8 WKS OLDE – $50 EA. – NO CREDIT – NO REFUNDS."

"Gimme a drink, Bobo!" shouted Mendez.

"You payin'?" frowned Bobo.

"Morgan, he just clean me out."

"Ain't no credit here, Mendez, you know that . . . but if you

want to sell Tony there, I could . . . "

"NO, Senor!" interrupted Mendez. "I would rather skin the mules for Piper Malloy than part with my Tony!" And with that Mendez grabbed the scrawny little tiger and stomped out the door.

"Hey Bobo!" yelled the Limey from the end of the plank. "This blighter ain't no female . . . she's a bloody Tom! I want my fifty quid back!"

"No refunds," snarled Bobo. "Can't you read, Limey?" And he went back to his glasses.

Fat Mary wore her best dress and a big floppy brown hat to go with her big, floppy, brown cat which she cradled lovingly in her fat arms.

"Eh, Marie!" yelled Frenchy, two hundred and eighty pounds of trapper-turned-miner. "You wanna go upstairs, cheri?"

"No work today, fat one! Not on Jeannie's wedding day." Then she assessed the Frenchman for a moment . . . she flashed her yellow grin.

"You look pretty good to Fat Mary . . . maybe later . . . for free."

Frenchy put a giant paw on her rump and growled in her ear. "Maybe you come live with Frenchy, eh? You wear dat chapeau? Eh?"

Peg clutched her three-legged ringtail tightly to her breast and stroked his wiskered nose. The ringtail spit at the yellow-eyed black poking his head out of the basket Deep Doe held at her side.

"You keep that there nigger away from my Peggie, you squaw slut!" she hissed at Deep Doe.

Deep Doe slowly turned her dark eyes on Peg and glared. Deep Doe wore her soft white buckskins, making Dueces Morgan a little nervous. He still carried part of a Nez-Perce arrowhead imbedded in his left hip.

"All right everyone!" yelled Dueces ". . . quiet down . . . settle down."

Jeannie's parlor was packed with miners, gamblers and whores . . . and cats! Everyone had a cat of some kind, except Dueces Morgan. He was officiating.

Piper looked very strange and ill at ease in his new suit and starched collar. Jeannie, holding the magnificent Persian, was the center of attention dressed in her low-cut burgundy dress and plumed hat, her flaming hair flowing over her nude, white shoulders.

"Gather 'round now . . . settle down, dammit!" snarled Dueces. Then to Piper: "Do you, Mordecai Piper Malloy, take Jeannie here to be your wedded woman?"

Piper, sweating and nervous, nodded quickly.

"Well, come ON man! Do you or don't you?" complained Dueces.

"Well . . . I guess I sure do, Dueces," mumbled Piper.

"And you, Jeannie O'Brien. Do you take this ugly little mule skinner for your man?" he intoned.

"I do. I surely DO, Mr. Morgan!" Jeannie purred.

"Then," shouted Dueces, "I pronounce you married up! Let's have a drink!"

The crowd cheered and Jeannie took the Piper of Larrabee Gulch into her arms and told him she loved him.

They poured out of Jeannie's crib and ran for Bobo's. Mendez, driving a brand new wagon, scattered the crowd as he whooped and waved and drove the mules on toward Bobo's. A sign on the wagon proclaimed:

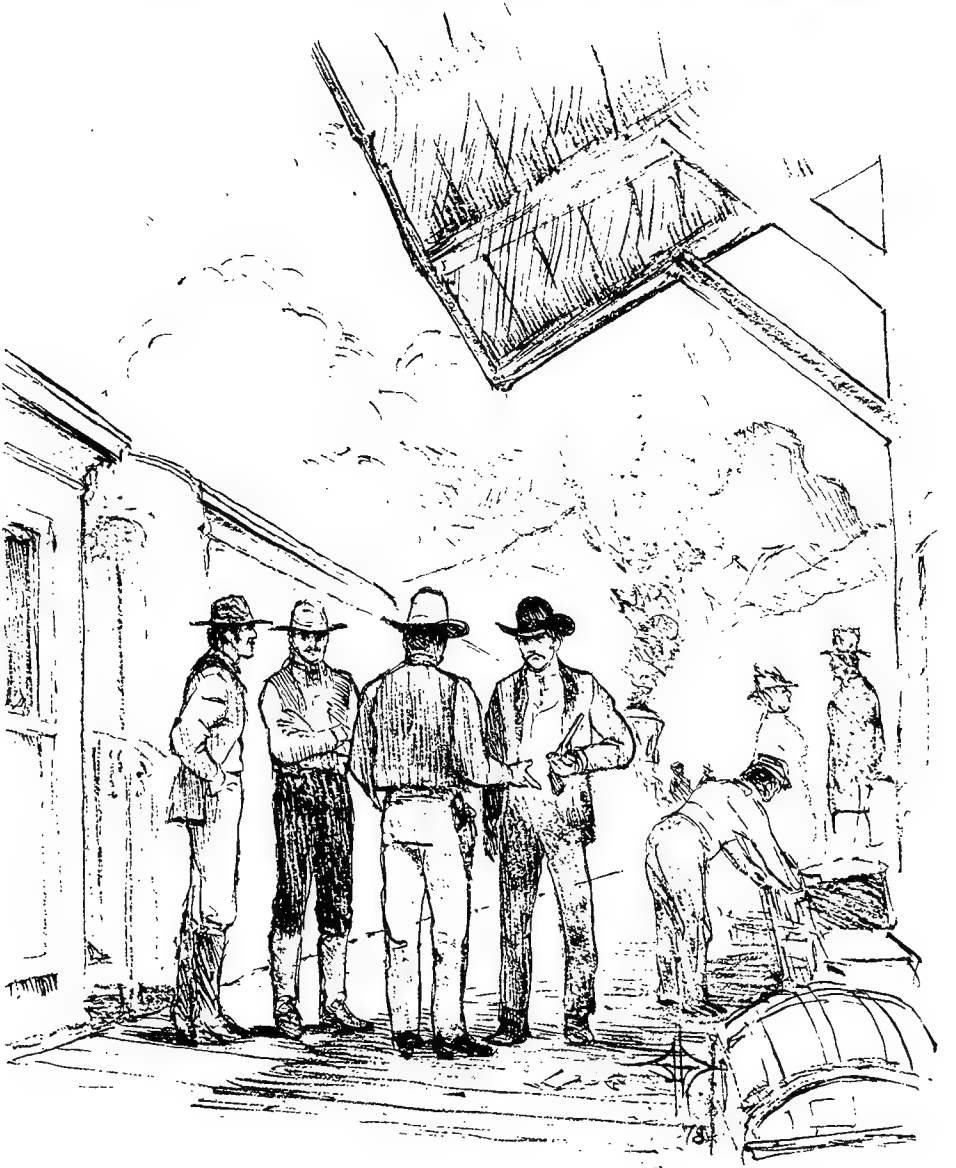
"PIPER'S INTERTERRITORY EXPRESS, LTD.—Jeannie Malloy, Prop."

"BOOM!" said Bobo's, and a miner fell through the doorway onto the muddy street. Then, as Jeannie, Piper and Dueces led the throng through the broken door, another miner crashed through the front window. Bobo stood in the middle of a wreckage of broken chairs and miners, while Morgan's Eloise sat on the end of the bar, grooming herself.

"Damned CATS!" growled Bobo.

"Rrrrrrrrroooooooowwwww . . . ." replied Eloise.

WHEN THE SHERIFF NEEDED A FRIEND



By S. Omar Barker

Jim Gilliland and Oliver Lee were arrested for killing a man.
I reckon they hadn't done it, but that's how the rumors ran.
They wouldn't surrender to Garrett, for fear he would shoot 'em down,
But they did give up to the district judge in old Las Cruces town.
Judge Parker figgered they'd never be safe in the old Las Cruces jail,
So he ordered 'em sent to Socorro, to be held without no bail.
The Sheriff came down from Socorro to escort the prisoners back—
A feller they called Doc Blackington, whose law was never slack.
They had to change trains at El Paso, several hours layover there,
And the Sheriff, he wanted to see the town, so he left his prisoner pair
To set and wait in the depot, by their word of honor bound
To be right there when he got back from a little junin' around.

Now Blackington liked his likker, and he drank so doggone much
That Constable Clements arrested him for breakin' the peace and such.
"I'm the Sheriff of Socorro County!" was Blackington's hot protest.
"Why else would I be wearing his star here on my vest?"
"Bunk!" said Constable Clements, and he said it plenty tough.
"I don't know you from Adam, and that 'sheriff' talk's all bluff!"

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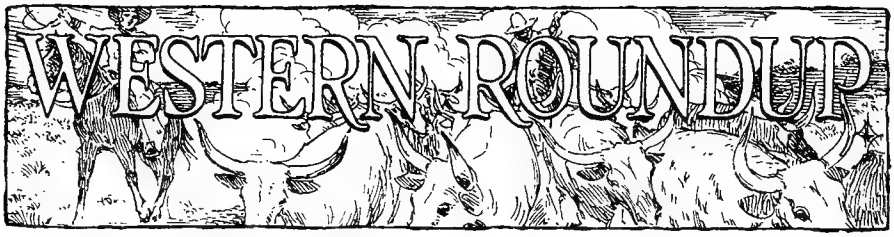
WHEN THE SHERIFF NEEDED A FRIEND

The Sheriff was in a pickle then, for Clements had took his gun,
And he had two prisoners waitin' for that next north train to run.
He threatened and begged and pleaded, but the Constable told him "Nope!"
Then Blackington got an idea that might get him off the rope.
"You claim I ain't no sheriff, and I reckon you don't *know* me,
But what if I got identified by a man named Oliver Lee?"
The constable's blue eyes widened. He said: "If that ain't no ruse
And Oliver Lee *says you're O.K., I'll damn sure turn you loose!"*

So they walked on up to the depot where the sheriff's prisoners were,
And Oliver Lee, he had to grin at the sheriff's ruffled fur.
His gray eyes kinder twinkled, but he played it fair and square.
"This man is Sheriff Blackington," he said. "I wouldn't care
If you throwed him in the hoosegow, but if you did he'd fail
To do his legal duty, which is takin' us to jail."
So Clements turned the Sheriff loose and watched them board their train.
Oldtimers have to chuckle as they tell the tale again.

Sometimes good men like Oliver Lee got crossways with the law,
But when it come to playin' fair, they always came to taw.
The jury found Lee innocent. He lived till '41,
A man as true with honor as he was with rope and gun.



What amounts to one of the very best western reference books to come down the pike in a long time is now available from American Heritage Books. Jointly written by Robert M. Utley and Wilcomb E. Washburn THE AMERICAN HERITAGE HISTORY OF THE INDIAN WARS is perhaps the finest single volume dealing with the more than four centuries of Indian versus White relations.

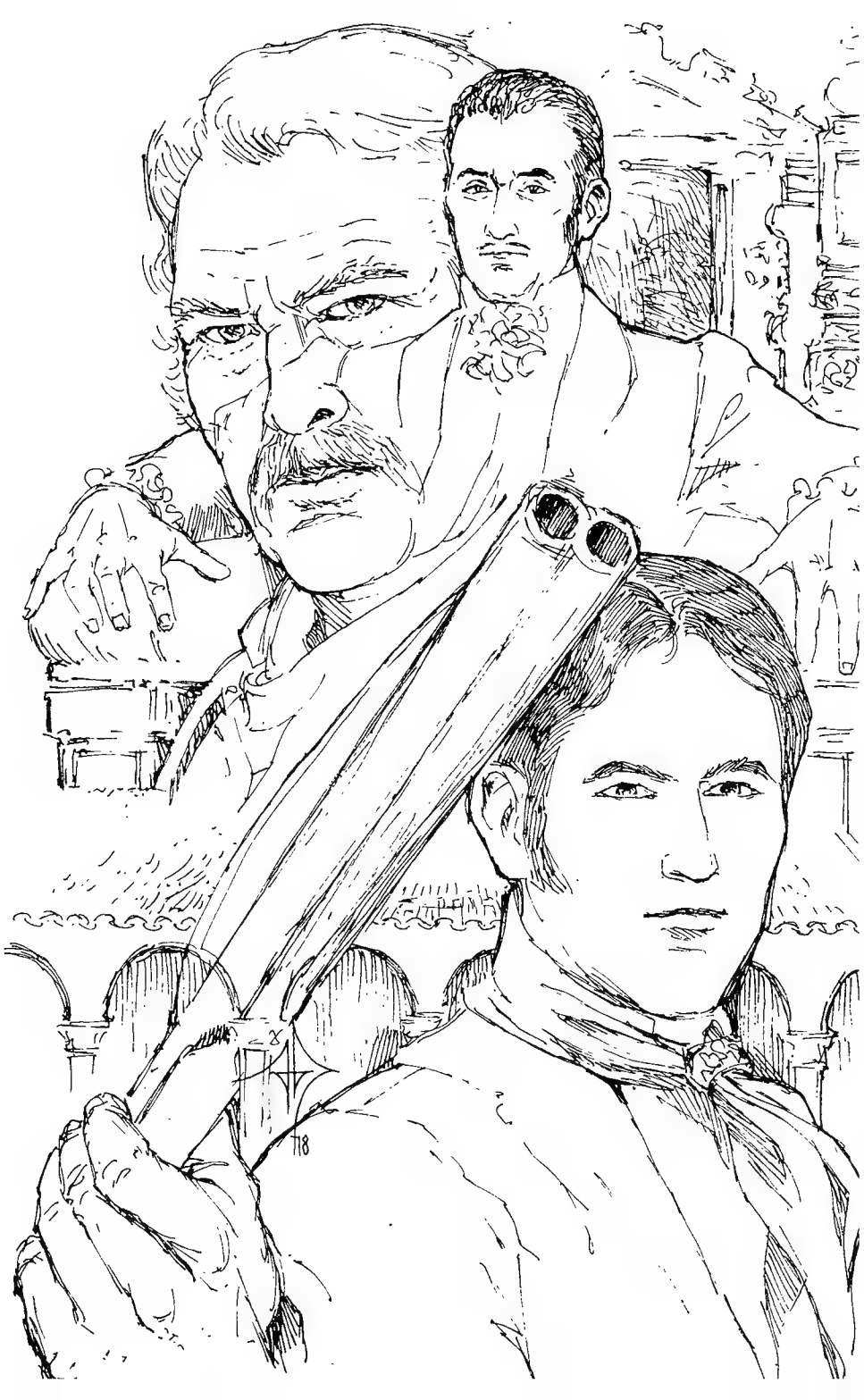
Moving with the expansion of the New World from Columbus' landing in 1492, Utley and Washburn have presented a concise history of the struggle between Europeans and Indians that resulted in barbarous behavior by both sides. The colony founded by Columbus was so willfully cruel to the Indians who inhabited the region that by 1493, when Columbus returned to the new world, not a man of the original colony remained. The Indians had overwhelmed them, extracting a vengeful price for the cruelty they had suffered at Spanish hands.

Picking up the pace THE HISTORY OF THE INDIAN WARS recounts the seesaw struggles between whites and reds during the next two hundred years, a time when a concerted effort would have driven the Europeans from America for at least a half century. Carefully the authors go into the reasons why the Indian were unable to forge a coalition of tribes to repel the white "intruders," and how ultimately the technologically superior Europeans maintained a growing foothold on the North American continent.

Two things about this book make it stand out from all of the other books which have dealt with the Indian Wars. First, the authors have remained totally unbiased in the presentation of their material, while providing the reader with a lively text. They have managed to capture the adventure and spirit of the times they write about, leaving the reader almost breathless as he follows the westward march of the expanding continent.

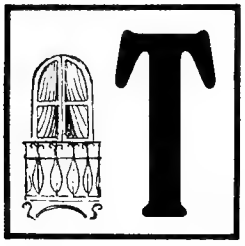
Second, and of equal importance is the quality of the presentation that American Heritage has lavished on this large (8½x11-inches, 352 pages) book. Every page is illustrated, and in all more than five hundred illustrations are used, many in color, the reproduction of which is brilliant, and beyond reproach. To the editors (Anne Moffat and Richard F. Snow) we tip our hats for a job well done.

Definitely worth adding to your western book shelf THE INDIAN WARS retails for $39.95 and is available from your local book store, or from The American Heritage Publishing Company, New York, N.Y.



THE TAKING OF A RANCH

BY VOYLE A. GLOVER



he old man awoke because of the cold. It bit deep into his bones, causing a shudder to sweep his leather-tough body. The fire, which had cast a flickering glow of warmth throughout the cabin in the early part of the night, was now a cold ash heap. Now, if you've ever awakened to a cold room and it became your job to get up and stir the fire, or rekindle it, then you can sympathize with the old man's dilemma. To get up meant to become colder than he already was, at least for the moment. To stay in bed was to stay cold, but at least he'd retain the little bit of warmth he had.

Finally, knowing he'd have to get up and do it sooner or later, the old man rolled out of the cot, throwing the coverlets back angrily. He hopped across the dirty, ice-cold floor to the woodbin. It was empty.

It saved his life, that struggle out of bed and the empty woodbin. Jake Muffins didn't know that yet though. All he knew was that a certain Mexican youth was going to get his ears boxed like he'd never had them boxed before. This made the third time Juan had left the woodbin empty.

Jake mumbled some not too complimentary words about Juan as he struggled into his heavy Mackinaw. He jammed cold feet into even colder boots, made stiff by the cold, and went trouserless to the door. One side of the back flap of his red long johns hung down by reason of a missing button. Jake tried to stop the draft there but to no avail. He snorted with disgust.

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Whatever was thought of old Jake, good or bad, everyone admitted the old man was rough as a cob and no one to fool with. He'd been a Pony rider, Fargo agent, lawman, miner, and some hints of a brief career as a rider of the owlhoot trail.

As Jake swung the heavy door open and saw the shadowy figures advancing towards him he did not panic. With a quickness that belied his age he slammed the door shut. In a breath, he'd scooped up a loaded shotgun and shoved a single action revolver into his jacket.

He had no idea why these men were skulking out there. He'd made his share of enemies—some said more than his share—but that was some years ago. These last years had been quiet. The more he thought about it the more puzzled he became.

"Whoever heard of a man havin' to fight in his drawers," he growled. It was an indignity he felt no man should have to suffer. Why, suppose he were killed? What laughter would go through the land when they found him laying there in his drawers. He could imagine the tale as it made the round of countless campfires.

Jake decided then and there that whatever happened this night he was not about to die. If he had to put on his pants while dying he'd do it, but he'd not be found with his pants off. It just wasn't right.

"Old man!" The brutal voice cut through the silence of the night.

Jake remained silent.

"We know you're in there. Come on out, you and the boy, or we'll have to drag you out."

Jake recognized the voice. It was a local tough, all-around no-good by the name of Alex something or another. It was some kind of foreign last name the man had and Jake never could quite say it.

"What do you want?" Jake demanded. He didn't care to reveal that he recognized the man's voice. If Alex missed his chance here tonight, Jake was going to see to it that the man never got another chance. He'd be visiting the thug with his

greener and it didn't bother him at all that the fight would not be fair.

Alex mumbled something to one of the three with him. A figure slid off to one side into the night, moving toward the cabin.

"We ain't after you old man! We want the Mex kid. Send him out and we'll let you alone."

It wasn't going to be believed but Jake had to say it anyway. "The boy ain't here."

A hurried conference followed this announcement. They were certain the young man was inside the cabin. A decision to fire the cabin and drive them out was agreed upon.

Alex growled a last instruction to the men. "Remember, we ain't to kill the kid. They want to make sure he's the one they want and we don't get paid for no stiff. I don't care what happens to the old man."

Inside, Jake was doing some experienced thinking. If he were out there and wanted anyone in the cabin he'd do the only thing possible . . . fire the cabin. Then when they ran out, shoot. He'd been peeping from a crack in the door for a rush, though he felt certain they'd not do such a thing. Yes, it was almost certain they'd burn the cabin to get him out there.

Only one thing Jake could see to do. They would be set for him as soon as the fire started. He had to move before they were set, before they started the fire to the cabin.

Jake glanced at his pants draped across the chair. It was a temptation to stop long enough to put them on but he knew he didn't dare take the time. He had to move out of this trap now, hoping to catch them by surprise.

It wasn't an old man, bent and gnarled with trembling hands, that slipped through the door but a warrior, tried and tested, silent as an old he-coon easing up on a bait. The greener was clutched in a fist, level and ready to go.

"Look out Pender!" The shouted warning rang across the little clearing with startling clarity.

Pender was unfortunate enough to have been elected to build

the fire at the side of the cabin. He jumped from the pile of kindling he'd been building, clawing for his gun. The blast from the shotgun took him in the chest and flung him back like a rag doll. He'd been too close to Jake to have even the fairest of chances.

Immediately there was a barrage of shots tearing into the cabin, some kicking up spoofs of dirt where Jake had been standing. He'd been standing there, but not very long. One of the cardinal rules for this kind of fight was to keep moving. Can't let yourself be pinned. Jake raced around the backside of the cabin, wondering idly what kind of figure he made running all bent over, his drawer flap waving wildly behind. He wished the moon wasn't so bright.

As bullets skimmed the air around him he heard one of the men say, "That crazy old man ain't got any pants on."

Jake had reached comparative safety in the woods behind the cabin. He didn't know how many there were out there but a feeling that at least one of them was very near crept over him. Jake Muffins didn't ignore that feeling. Instinct had saved his hide more times than he could remember.

He bellied down, the cold, frozen ground tightening his guts. What he wouldn't give for those pants now! He crawled until he was out of sight and sound of the little cabin. Probably they'd send a man around each side, circling to catch him. One man was here already. Jake was certain of that.

When he'd crawled far enough to feel safe he rose carefully. A silence hung on the mountainside. The old fighter pulled his face down into his Mackinaw. He wasn't about to get potted because one of those vipers spotted his breath. Mistakes like that belong to fools and little children.

He moved in a long looping circle, increasing his distance from the cabin. Didn't pay to move around too close to the enemy . . . not until you're ready to anyway. The old man wasn't running, he was just preparing to bring the fight to them, his way.

A cloud closed in on the moon. Jake smiled his appreciation.

In less than an hour he'd moved all the way to the front part of the cabin and was moving slowly toward the clearing. His legs were beginning to get numb from the cold.

Alex crouched beside a tree watching the front door expectantly. He was enraged. That one old man should give them trouble was hard to swallow. But Whetter had warned him to be careful of the old man. He wished he'd taken the warning seriously.

The other two men were searching for the old man. Talbot, part Indian, part who-knows-what, deadly in this kind of fighting, was already back there. Lilly had taken the longer route around the left side.

He eyed the door with increasing impatience. What if the old man was right? All he'd have to show for this night's work would be one dead man, not counting Jake when they found him.

With the old man on the loose he dared not say anything. He wanted to hello the cabin and try and talk young Juan out of there. But the blossomed respect for Muffins kept him silent. He'd wait until Lilly and Talbot took care of the old man.

Some people tend to discount the ability of some old folk. They think of them as old and feeble, unable to fend for themselves. If Alex had been told that the old man had slipped past Talbot, that creeping shadow of a man, why, he'd have laughed his contempt for such a story. Oh, he permitted its possibility but, practically speaking, he just didn't allow for such a thing. The man was too old for that sort of work. Muffins might be a good shot still, and maybe he could move faster than other men his age, but he wouldn't slip past Talbot. An Indian couldn't slip past that man.

Alex figured the old man was laying right near the cabin, teeth chattering, if he had any. He'd be waiting to help drop somebody if they tried to rush the cabin. Yeah, that would be like the old man, waiting for someone to show themself.

The icy nudge of the twin barrels of the greener had a profound effect on Alex. His eyes rolled back and his mouth dropped open with surprise and fear.

"You make a peep, son, and your head will be all over that tree." Jake stood just behind the man, the shotgun resting against the man's bare neck.

He asked Alex, "What did you want the boy for?"

A man just doesn't lie when he has the barrels of a greener resting on him and the cold, killer-blue eyes of a man looking hungrily at him.

"We was to take him to a man in Tracer, Link Whetter. He was to give us $100 for the job. He wasn't to hurt the boy, honest." Desperation sounded from the man as old stories about this big man came back to him.

"What did this Whetter want with the boy?" Jake demanded.

"I don't know. We was just told where the boy would be and to get him." The steady, ruthless stare of the old man made Alex believe some of those stories he'd heard about this man. The old man wanted to pull the trigger. Alex could feel it.

"I know you, Alex. I ought to kill you outright. It ain't beyond me, you know. If I was ten years younger you'd be layin' there now. Reckon I'm getting soft in my old age. So, I'm gonna let you live . . . maybe."

The pent-up breath of the thug came out slowly in relief. Death had never been so close to him. The mark this old man had put on his soul would ever be with him.

He chanced the question Jake's "maybe" had sparked. "What do you mean, maybe?"

Jake answered, "Wondered when you'd get around to askin'. I mean that you are gonna have to call off your dogs back there. Make them come in so's I can get them under my gun. Then I'll send you all packin' down the trail. And you'll take that piece of meat with you. I ain't diggin' no graves in this frozen ground."

He eyed Alex curiously, then asked, "Are you particularly anxious to die?"

"No! No, I'll do it." Jake looked away as the man's terror embarrassed him. Jake's kind of man didn't whimper but took what he bought without crying.

Acting was never Alex's long suit, but when your life depends on a thing you can do a whale of a job. That's what he did. He called the two men with a plain, outright, but believable, lie. Nothing else would have worked. They were a suspicious breed and anything short of what Alex had called them for would have brought them slinking in, getting Alex killed in the process.

"Hey Talbot! Lilly! Come on out! I got the old man here. I can't blink an eye or he'll jump me, sure." He made his voice sound piqued, impatience giving his voice an authenticity that could not be doubted.

When Jake lowered the greener at them they were two of the most surprised gents ever. They were also furious, realizing Alex's part in the trap. Talbot swore his revenge on Alex.

"You cur! I'll get you for this if it's the last thing I ever do." His lip curled in contempt and promise flashed from his eyes. Alex said nothing.

Jake cut into the man's rage. "I ain't carin' what you do with him, son, but he did the same as you'd have done with this greener restin' on your neck."

Talbot sneered, "Not likely, you old buzzard. I crawl for no man."

There are some men you can taunt and get away with it and then there's some you can't. They don't give one inch. That was Jake.

He cut loose with the greener. The blast took the feet out from under the sneering Talbot. The other man, standing close by, jumped around yelping, having taken some of the pellets. But the main charge, being aimed just in front of Talbot, did exactly what Jake wanted. It knocked the man down and put enough shot into his legs that he'd be laid up for some time. Jake was too cold to care much even if the man didn't recover from the wound. The man had said the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Jake said drily, to the writhing figure, "You'll crawl awhile, I

reckon. I might be an old buzzard but, son, I'm a tough old buzzard."

It took them awhile to make a litter to carry the dead man and the wounded Talbot. Jake figured they'd likely dump the dead body off into some ravine. They weren't the type to give a man a decent burial.

First thing Jake did after returning into the cabin was pull on his pants. They were stiff from the cold but somehow it felt good to have them on. It made him a complete man.

CHAPTER 2

Jake arrived in Tracer late the next afternoon. The active, mud-spattered little town held far more than its share of thieves and robbers. This was due, in part, to its location so near the Mexican border. It was a haven, for a man could run out the backside of the town and be in Mexico in just a few hours.

Jake stopped a large bearded fellow lumbering along the crusted boardwalk. "Say, reckon you could tell me how to get to a feller?" Jake tried to appear polite and unassuming. He acted like a farmer trying to sell a sick cow to a butcher.

The bearded man appraised Jake carefully, spat in the street, then replied, "Might be I could."

The obvious meaning of the man's words was not lost upon Jake. He reached into a pocket and fished out a silver dollar. The man took the dollar carefully, not wanting to scare this good fortune away. Where there was one silver dollar there was sure to be another.

"Now, show me how I find Link Whetter," Jake drawled.

The man gave Jake a sick look, his nose taking a reddish hue, fat lips parting as though feeling for the right words. Finally he managed, "Look, mister, I got to know what you want with Whetter. Bringing you up to him and him not wantin' you to find him could get me killed."

Jake did some fast thinking. Apparently this Whetter had a scary reputation. Funny that he'd never heard of the man. Jake thought he knew just about all the toughs around these parts.

"That feller said if I was ever in need of a job I should look him up. Said he could use this scattergun." Jake hoped he looked like someone Whetter might hire.

"Well, that's better," the much relieved man announced. "Just you follow me." They tromped down the wooden walkway together.

The big man entered a shabby building. Jake followed. It turned out to be a saloon, though there was no sign outside announcing it as such, the sign having been shot off some weeks ago.

It was narrow inside, with tables strewn about the room at random. A plank thrown across some barrels served as a bar. The stench of warm beer, acid whiskey and stale smoke was overpowering. Jake, long a lover of fresh air and a teetotaler, covered his nose at the odorous attack.

The man turned and growled at Jake, "That table at the end of the room is where you'll find Whetter." He pointed to the table.

Jake walked slowly to the table, shifting the greener to his right side. He tried to appear casual, though his stomach had contracted at the coming confrontation. Always did that.

Three men were at the table and Jake could not be sure which was Whetter. It was dim back there and there was nothing markedly different about the three. Jake eyed each in turn, pausing on the features of one man. He knew this man.

Jake had not come up to the table unnoticed. The man Jake had recognized had spotted him and taken in the shotgun. He recognized Jake as well. The only thing he did though was to straighten some, balancing himself better.

"Hello, Ducky," drawled Jake.

A tightening of the eyes revealed the greeting met the mark. The man eased back in his chair watching the big man warily, knowing Jake Muffins from years back.

"Name's Whetter now, Muffins. What do you want?" He had a good idea what Muffins wanted but there was no sense in pushing things too soon.

"So you ain't Ducky no more, huh? Didn't think you'd ever loose that handle after Widder Lester put that load of birdshot in your britches. You waddled real nice after that. Still waddle, do you?"

Pure hatred blazed from Whetter's eyes. No one here had known that story till now. His right eyelid began to twitch. It told anyone who knew Whetter that he was an eyeblink away from killing.

Jake had not lived as long as he had by being foolish. Besides, he had seen Stone, or Whetter as he was known here, in action before. The twitch was not missed and Jake knew the sign well.

The loud, gut-tightening click of twin hammers being reared back brought a silence to the room faster than if someone had yelled for silence. All eyes went to that little corner of the room, though several soft scrapings could be heard from departing customers.

"Before you die, Ducky, I got some questions to ask of you, so don't be in no hurry, huh?" Jake grinned, and sucked at his teeth absently. He continued, "If you or anyone at this table makes a move, these hammers are likely to fall. They operate on movement. Trained 'em thataway myself."

"How 'bout us, old man. What do you want with us?" ventured one of the men seated at the table.

"I just want you to set still. Nuthin' more." Jake's voice was raspy now.

He looked at Whetter and said, "Alex missed his try for the boy. Funny, they tried for me too, but I reckon three growed boys up and died, the other decided they didn't want to fight and went home. Had to carry that Injun lookin' feller. Somethin' happened to his legs."

Whetter swallowed in spite of himself and Jake knew he had the man scared. He wanted him scared though. "One of 'em told me about you, Whetter, so I thought I'd come on down and collect a scalp, in a manner of speakin'." Jake paused to let the man's terror build. He'd let him off the hook slowly, at the same time maybe getting the information he desired.

The pause was like a trigger to Whetter's nerves. The man went into motion like a cat in the middle of six dogs. He literally exploded.

Jake was not in such a formidable position as he thought. In fact, the only thing that saved him was the fact that Whetter, in kicking at the greener, overbalanced himself as he was drawing his gun.

A shower of plaster followed the heavy boom of the greener, discharging upon impact with Whetter's foot. Jake, his advantage imbedded in the plaster, fell away from the table, rolling towards some tables near the side of the building. He struck the legs of a table, turned it over and was behind it none too soon. Bullets began smacking into the table top with heartless regularity.

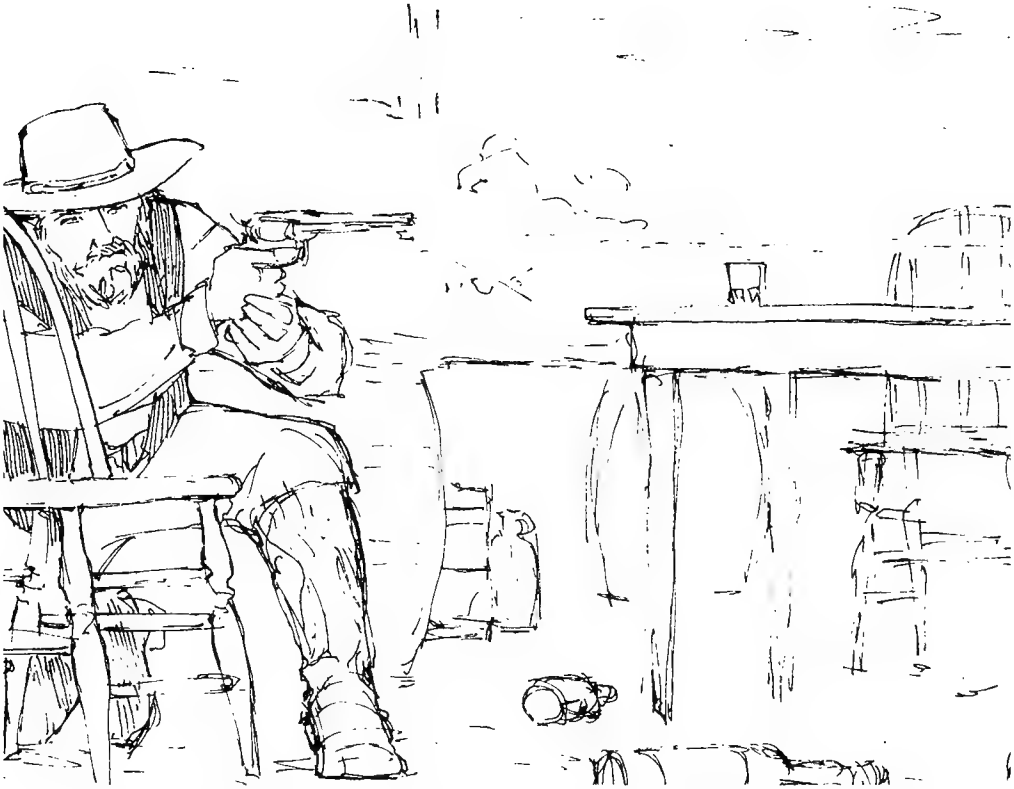
Something plowed hard against Jake's heavily Mackinawed shoulder. A bullet had gone through the table top. He rolled away from the table, fumbling for shells as he went. He flung down another table, this one heavier, and crouched behind it.

Jake now had the shotgun loaded with two shells tucked in his fingers for an instant reload. Then a scorching hot something whipped across his neck. He turned to see the bearded fellow who'd led him in firing at him. The man had been so sure of his shot that he'd not even bothered to find adequate shelter before firing. The man was kneeling behind a chair.

Jake threw the greener around in one easy motion and fired without even taking aim. With that gun one didn't have to take any real kind of aim. Jake knew that he was right on target. He'd spent too many hours with this friend. The shot filtered its way through the rungs of the chair and found the man. He screamed and fell away. A fresh shell was popped into the greener.

He felt into his pocket and got another live shell to replace the one from his finger. Soon they'd likely try and circle. The only thing that had kept them from doing it already was the presence of the greener. It had a way of keeping a man careful.

The firing stopped. "Muffins! Let's talk!" It was Whetter.



Jake answered. "Talk or shoot, son. All the same to me."

"We got a stalemate here. You can't git none of us and we don't dare try for you while you got that scattergun."

A hasty discussion followed behind the table in the back of the room where Whetter and his two cronies huddled. Whetter finally announced, "Let's call a truce. No more shooting. We put up our guns if you put that scattergun away. What say?"

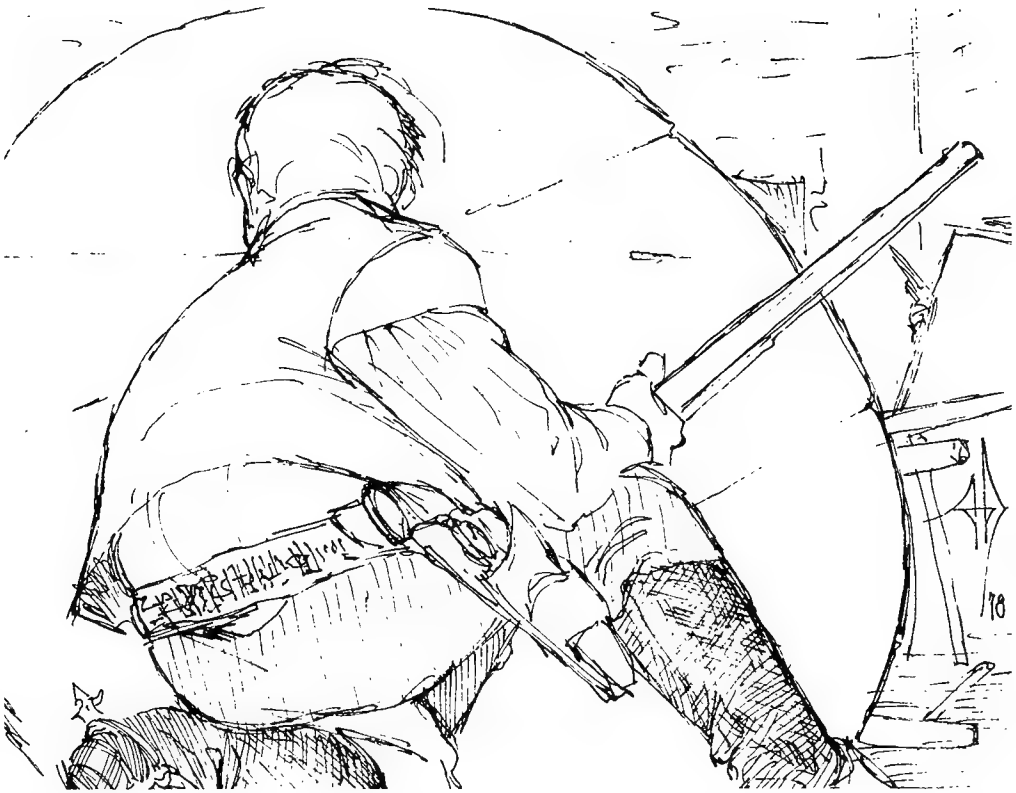
Jake laughed. "I ain't ate loco weed today, Whetter. We can have a truce, but on my terms. Otherwise we wait it out. Reckon I'm favored to win this little set-to."

Hostile silence. Then, "Okay, Muffins. Your way, only no shootin'. Your word on that."

"Slide them guns across the floor one at a time. Then stand up in sight with your hands where I can see them. I won't shoot less you give cause to."

"I ain't standin' up in front of that crazy old man!" shouted one of the trio. His voice was angry and desperate.

"You'll stand or die right here kneelin'." Whetter's emotion-trebled voice showed him to be dangerous.



In a moment the heavy, metallic sound of the guns was heard as they slid across the floor. Jake peeked carefully around the side of the table. The men stood revealed, hands on the top of the table.

Jake rose, then growled at Whetter, "If you hadn't been so quick to jump, boy, you'd have found that I only wanted some information. Reckon I didn't know your scare was up so bad."

"What do you want to know, Muffins?"

Jake answered promptly, "Who paid you to get the boy, and why?"

Whetter considered the question a moment, then said, "Fair enough since we busted the job. We was to deliver the kid to a line shack south of here in the mountains. Somebody was to meet us, take the kid and pay us off. That's all I know."

Jake mused over the information a minute. Whetter fumbled at his vest and the greener wavered, then steadied in line with Whetter. The man paled, then spoke, "I'm after a letter, that's all. You can read it for yourself."

"Put it on that table over there," Jake commanded.

Whetter produced a dirty, crumpled piece of paper and laid it carefully on the table, then moved back out of the way. Jake moved over to the table and picked the paper up. He shook it out, held it up eye level and in line with the three men. When he'd finished the letter he shoved it into a pocket.

He said, "Ducky, if you or anyone in this town makes a try for me and misses, I'm coming for you without askin' any questions." He looked hard at Whetter, then added, "I been missed afore, Ducky. Remember that."

With that, Jake backed his way out of the narrow room and into the brightness outside. He blinked, shaded his eyes, then slipped off down the alley. In a few short minutes Jake Muffins was horsed and headed for the south mountains.

CHAPTER 3

The men huddled around the fire seeking its meager warmth. Two days had passed and they were nervous. Already a fight had erupted amongst them, only to be broken up by the slender, dangerous-looking leader.

One of the men, a short, black-haired individual with crossed bandoleeras covering his chest in true Mexican fashion, stood to his feet and began walking stiffly, swinging his arms to stir circulation and generate warmth.

Facing the crouched leader he announced, "Diaz, you may have a fire in your blood that keeps the warmth in your bones, but I have no such thing. Surely, at least one or two of us could go into the little house and rest there, no?"

Diaz rose and faced the man, "Frederico," he began, "you are a young fool and will likely not live to see many more years. Here we are safe from attack. There we would be in the open, our only defense a wooden building. Wood burns, Frederico. To separate is to weaken ourselves." Diaz turned his scarred face back to the fire.

"Go back to the fire and stop making breezes with your mouth." The whip-lean man stooped and poured himself a

generous portion of the heavy black coffee that had stood long in the pot. The steam rose and disappeared into the night.

While the men were there another figure was also steeling himself against the cold. Jake lay on a rocky shelf nearly a quarter of a mile away watching the men below who kept a deadly vigil by his cabin. There was absolutely no way to get to them without them hearing him or spotting him first. Their leader had chosen his ground well. A lesser man would have chosen the warmth and immediate security of the cabin.

He crawled back to his horse, mounted and sloped on down into the wooded terrain near the edge of the mountain. He made a short camp which, for Jake, meant munching on some dried meat, then going to bed. He rolled up in his blanket, tying a piece of twine to his wrist. The other end of that twine led to his horse. The mare he'd left saddled, though he'd loosened the girth.

If you have a good horse, it will raise its head at the presence of danger; otherwise, it will stand quiet, moving from time to time, but slowly. Any quick movement on the twine alerted the sleeper. It meant a light, interrupted sleep at best, but that was better than a permanent one.

Morning came to the Mexican camp without any sleep coming to the lithe figure. Diaz paced nervously, the huge quantity of black coffee consumed during the night stimulating him into nervous activity.

"Artego!" he snapped.

A black head reared itself swiftly from beneath a thin pile of blankets. With eyes blinking, Artego asked, "What is it? Who calls?"

"Get up and ride down the trail to the point at which it drops into the valley. See if you can spot any riders approaching."

Artego mumbled something and groaned as he stood, blankets falling about his feet. He groped for the heavy cartridge belt, holster attached, which he'd hiked up around his chest.

"Now, Artego! Not later! I want you there now!" Diaz

yelled. The man was letting his impatience rule now.

Without a word, knowing this man only too well, Artego let the blankets lie, walked swiftly to his dun, saddled and was off down the trail. Diaz watched the retreating figure, then began walking about the camp kicking sleeping figures into wakefulness. It looked to be another long day with little to do but talk of things that had already been talked about and look at one another.

Meanwhile, Artego rode stiff-backed down the trail. He wondered why he'd been the one chosen for the task, although he really didn't mind. He was glad to do something other than sit around.

He reached the tip of the point where the road dropped and pulled the dun up. His eyes walked across the valley below, searching for any sign of movement. But all he saw was the blue haze of the valley, and in the far distance he could make out the dim visage of Tracer.

He thought once he heard a sound behind him but ignored it when it did not sound again. He supposed it to be a deer, or squirrel, or some other small animal. When the sound came again he looked behind him slowly, taking no alarm. His wide black eyes came to rest on a huge figure of man sitting casually on a fallen tree. It really wasn't the sight of the man that caused Artego's eyes to widen but the ugly shotgun, butt resting on the log, muzzles pointing his way. A gun like that could blow him off the side of the mountain.

"Took you long enough to turn around. You deef or something?" Jake took the piece of grass he was chewing on and threw it away.

Artego stared at Jake quizzically. He answered, "You are quiet. For such an old one you move very quietly."

Jake took the jab with a grin. He plucked another blade of grass, savoring its juiciness for a moment. "Let's get right down to business, son. I ain't lookin' to hurt you, so you can just pull yourself off that pony and we'll have a little confab right over here."

Artego complied with the demand. And demand it was. A certain firmness in the old man's voice said that much. He stood by his horse looking expectantly at Jake.

"How come you fellers to be wantin' Juan Delano?" he asked.

"To that I cannot say, senor. I only know that we were to take the boy across the border. Where from there, I do not know."

"Where are you boys from?" Jake asked.

"I am from across the border, a vaquero," Artego answered. "I do not know where these other fellows are from. They did not tell me and I am not foolish enough to ask."

"Who do you ride for?" queried Jake.

"For a small rancho just this side of the border," Artego lied. "A Senor Hernandez. You have heard of him, perhaps?"

Jake shook his head. It all sounded good but he felt instinctively the man was lying to him. There was a way to determine for sure whether or not the man was lying. Jake didn't know of a man who'd lie under the cocked barrels of a greener. Not when they're waving in his face.

He pulled the gun across his body, easing the twin hammers back. He punched Artego in the belly with the barrels and left the gun rest there.

"Now, son, we are going to start all over and I want you to tell me the right story this time. You lied to me and lived this time. You won't live after the next time."

Artego swallowed. He was a brave man but there is a point at which bravery can be foolish. There may be something he did not know that this gringo was aware of, in which case the man could catch him in a lie. Artego was not prepared to die for such a thing as telling a lie.

Fortunately for Artego, unfortunately for Jake, something happened to prevent further rehearsal of the questioning. The thud of a bullet striking wood interrupted them and sent Jake diving for cover, with Artego scampering for shelter as well.

Jake rolled over the log none too soon. The shots were

coming closer to the mark as the man got the range. He was an excellent marksman, whoever he was. Jake slid along the log and into the brush. He could hear the pounding of hooves as riders approached.

Diaz rode into view, gun smoking. That he'd come so close to hitting Jake while on a running horse with a handgun was a tribute to the man; he was a deadly marksman. He reined up and leaped off his horse for cover, thinking Jake to be yet behind the log.

Jake made his horse in a matter of seconds. Without wasting any time he mounted and took off at a dead run. They would discover him gone and be coming for him in a matter of moments so Jake did the most unlikely thing he could think of. He rode straight for the same little clearing.

He burst out of the trees and into the clearing just as Diaz was remounting to search for him. The others had caught up with Diaz and were sitting on their horses waiting for Diaz to mount and lead the search.

"Get him!" Diaz screamed.

Jake lowered the shotgun and pulled the trigger. Yelps, the screams of horses and general confusion followed. The old man grinned and wheeled his mare back toward the trail leading into the valley. He wasn't likely to be followed.

As he dropped over the top of the trail a shot whistled over his head. He turned to see Diaz, cool and poised, taking another bead on him with his handgun. The range was too great for accurate shooting, but the man had done remarkably well in coming so close. Soon Jake was out of sight.

Back on the mountain top Diaz stood surveying his little band. Diaz and Artego alone were unmarked. The rest had wounds, though none of them serious. One of the horses had a nasty blooded place on her rump.

Diaz snarled, "Fix yourselves. We are going back."

He yanked cruelly at the reins of his blooded Spanish stallion, forcing the others to give way. The men remounted and followed, each glad to be done with this unpleasant game. They were more comfortable fighting cattle than wild gringos.

CHAPTER 4

Jake skirted Tracer and headed for the Hallas ranch. He'd likely find young Juan there. Henry, or Hank, as called by his friends, had taken young Juan on as a rider and used him to break some of his private stock. The boy had a way with horses.

When Jake turned in at the Hallas gate it was late in the afternoon. Big Hank Hallas greeted him warmly.

Henry Hallas, under the able guidance of his wife, had accumulated quite a vast holding in land and cattle. He was wealthy beyond his understanding. He and Jake had never held more than fifty dollars between them. To know that he had twice fifty thousand in his bank account was staggering to him. He hadn't gotten used to the fact that he was a wealthy man yet.

He stomped down the steps to greet Jake. "You old goat! What brings you out of them hills? Didn't figure on seein' you till the end of winter." He grinned at Jake.

Jake, still astride his mare, looked down at Henry, a squinted eye cocked in seriousness. "Shot a man for callin' me old the other day. Want to take that back, or do I commence on you?"

Hank laughed. "You old codger! You never saw the day you could take me and you know it."

Jake chuckled, then said drily, "If I'm so old what are you, who're three years older than me. And where'd you git that scar runnin' down the whole side of your ugly face?"

Hank reached up and pulled Jake out of the saddle in mock anger. "So you licked me a time or two. Took a chair or somethin' else in your hand to do it though."

The two men tramped off and up to the house, reminiscing, sharing old times, forgotten moments on the trail, old camps, old battles. Arm in arm they strode, two big men, each grayed, faces wrinkled with time and bright suns, but both walking straight, unbent.

After they settled themselves in the immense front room Hank had one of the several houseboys fetch Juan. Jake was

mighty anxious to see the boy. He was soon located near one of the corrals where he'd been talking with Andrea, one of Hank's daughters.

In a few moments the slim, dark-skinned youth appeared. Everything about the boy suggested unusualness. Here was a youth as different from his fellows as night was from day, as a wolf from a coyote, as a lion from a cat.

His eyes suggested the first difference. A fire burned there. It flickered and danced wildly. A narrow, aquiline nose made his features appear delicate at first glance. But a straight, clean-lined chin thrust forward defiantly, arguing the fragility of that face. It balanced the youth's characteristics nicely. A question was left in the mind. What kind of man was this? Was he steel? Or clay? The eyes said steel, the nose suggested a weakness, but the chin argued for strength.

As soon as he walked through the door Jake rose from his seat.

"Ah, Senor Jake. What brings you from the cabin? I should have returned but opportunity did not show herself."

Jake walked up to the youth and swung a blow that started from his hip. It struck the boy full on the jaw. Juan, totally unprepared, fell to the floor. He staggered to his feet only to be met by another, this one to the midriff. It put him on his tail in the middle of the floor. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

Jake said calmly, no anger in him at all, "That first one's for almost getting me killed today; the other's for good measure." He turned and walked back to his seat, a plush, overstuffed chair.

Juan rose gracefully to his feet. His eyes were terrible, but not a trace of emotion showed on his features. In a gentle voice, the barest glimmer of promise showing, he said, "Do not ever strike me again." He did not threaten but he did not need to. His kind never needed to boast or tell in any detail. You just knew.

Jake growled, "I had to light your fire, chop your wood and fight your battles, all in one day. I'm highly irritated, boy."

Juan, the fire slowly dying in his agate eyes, said, "Senor Jake, I know that I am under your care. I am sorry that my presence under your roof has brought you trouble." Juan looked down at his feet. When he looked back up his eyes were aflame again. He looked at Jake Muffins until the older man stirred under the heat of that gaze.

Juan continued, "But senor, you shall pay for the one blow you gave me."

Jake grunted as though hit by a physical blow, so deadly sounding and full of promise had been the threat. He rose to go for the young man. Juan did not flee nor did he turn his gaze away from Jake.

Hank grabbed Jake. "Aw, the kid's just riled. Wouldn't you be if some big oaf laid into you without any warning?"

Jake regained his good humor and he eased himself back into the chair. Curious, he asked, "What blow you resentin', boy? They both hurt, didn't they?"

Juan replied quickly, "The second one. It was not necessary."

Jake laughed. In spite of himself he had to like this lad. He'd raised him since the boy was seven years of age. Now, just a few months away from eighteen, the boy, suddenly a young man, would be leaving him. That was the length of time Jake had agreed to keep him. After that the boy was on his own to come and go as he pleased.

"Well, in that case, I apologize for that second one. You'll forgive it?" Jake thrust out his hand in a rough manner.

Juan paused a moment. He walked forward and took the hand. Looking deep into Jake's eyes he said, "I forgive, senor, but I do not forget."

Jake growled, to no one in particular, "Now what's that supposed to mean?"

Later that night, after discussing everything at some length with Juan, he had learned nothing. There was a careful guardedness to Juan's answers. It puzzled Jake.

After Juan was dismissed Jake looked at Hank. "I just don't understand why anyone would want to carry that kid off. What

would bring four men after that boy?"

Hank sat in his chair with a deep, thoughtful look on his face. It was true that his wife had the business mind and knew finances, but his was an instinctive, though oftentimes laborious, delving kind of mind. He could look at a situation from crazy angles, unthought of by most. His was the kind of a mind that moved all his cattle from a lush, rolling pasture to a small, overstocked graze on a mere hunch. How his mind delivered the hunch he was never sure of, but when the unexpected, early snow hit it was a much relieved foreman who bragged on the genius he had for a boss.

The foreman, a veteran of the cattle business, had spent many an hour berating Henry Hallas, telling all what a fool the man was in moving the cattle to such a pasture.

The low-pastured cattle had not suffered much as the winds did not beat them and the snow did not pile up about them in huge drifts. Such were the hunches of Henry Hallas, for his was a mind that reacted to minor things that have no meaning for the average mind.

He looked over to Jake and said, "You took that boy from an uncle, didn't you?"

Jake nodded. "Yeah, old boy by the name of Perez. Told me the kid had lost his folks in a terrible murder. Said he was too old to care for the boy and asked if I would be willing to raise the boy. Give me a nice piece of change for the job too. Pert near $400."

Hank smiled at this, remembering the day when he too would have thought that a great sum. He asked Jake, "What were you doing there? You never did tell me why you went down there."

Jake snorted, then grinned. He'd never told anyone this but he felt like sharing the secret with his old friend. "I went down there to find me a wife."

Hank choked back a gasp of surprise. "You what?" he demanded. Then he began laughing uncontrollably.

Jake hadn't expected such a reaction. A chuckle, yes, but not this. It was totally uncalled for. "So what's wrong with that?"

he argued. "Ain't a body got a right to get hisself hitched if he's a mind to?"

Tears rolled down the cheeks of big Hank by now and he struggled to get his wind back, then answered, "Yeah, but it ain't everybody who has to go plumb to Mexico to find a woman that'll have him!" Hank cackled unmercifully.

Jake jumped up and stalked over to his friend, writhing in uncontrollable mirth in his chair. He grabbed Hank by the shirt front and said angrily, "You mule head! If you wasn't so old I'd choke off some of that laughin' with some of them teeth in your head." He shook the still laughing rancher and continued, "For your information, I heard that them Mexican women beat the 'Merican women all holler for wives. They are the best wives a man can find."

Hank stopped his laughing long enough to ask, "And who told you that, my desperate friend?"

Jake released him and stalked back to his chair. "I just heard it around, that's all."

For a few minutes silence reigned. Then Jake looked over at Hank and grinned sheepishly. "Reckon it is a mite funny, me traipsin' down into a foreign country like that just to find a wife." They both chuckled some, then a thought struck Jake, spreading a frown of seriousness across his rough features.

He looked hard at Hank and said, "You'll keep this under your hat, pardner. I ain't wantin' the world to know ol' Jake went off the deep end like that. Every man has his secrets."

Hank looked thoughtful a moment, as though toying with the idea. He teased, "Why that'd shore give you a whole new image, pard. The boys never knew the Jake Muffins, famous wife hunter! That'd set them to discussin' your new image for a whole year, I reckon!"

Jake groaned. "You let this get out and you and me are quits. Now you give me your word, I'm askin' for old time's sake, that you'll not breathe a word of this ever. Not even, and especially not even, to that filly of you'n."

Hank grinned, then said with a sigh of regret, "Done!" He

paused, looking regretful, then added, "But what a good time the boys would have with that tale."

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. "You had me terrible worried there, pard. I thought I was goin' to have to cut your tongue out or somethin' equally as bad."

Hank, suddenly serious, said, "Jake, have you ever heard anything from the boy's uncle?"

Jake answered, "Well, yes I did, come to think about it. About one year ago this feller comes up to me and asks if I was me. I reckoned as how I was. He tells me that this Perez, the boy's uncle, wants to see Juan. I told him that if Juan wanted to go it was all right with me; but Juan, when I tell him about it, flat tells me he don't want to go and don't want anything to do with his uncle."

A look of interest was growing in Hank's eyes. "You said the uncle gave Juan to you because he was too old to keep the boy. How long ago was this?" He was on to something, but could not quite put his finger on it yet.

"About eleven years ago."

"And how old did this Perez appear to be then?"

Jake, his weather-blue eyes growing narrow with sudden interest, replied, "Now that I recollect I did think it was a bit strange. That hombre didn't appear to have any years on me. In fact, I looked to have a few on him. But as I remember he said some kind of illness made it hard for him to keep up with the boy."

Hank leaned forward. "Could he have been lying, Jake?"

Jake looked at the wall, his mind going back to that scene long ago. He remembered riding up to the huge villa at the invitation of Perez, handed to him in town by one of the man's servants. When he'd left he had Juan with him and a pouch full of gold coins.

He tried to recall his first impression of Perez. The man had kept him waiting in some kind of fancy little garden. That had irritated him some but he'd dismissed it from his mind, attributing it to the man's position.

Perez had entered the garden quietly. Jake had been looking

at some odd flowers and was surprised to find the dark-visaged man standing there eyeing him. Jake recalled that there was something about the man suggestive of danger. Also, he'd caught a trace of reluctance on his part to have to deal with such a man as Jake Muffins personally. But Jake had put that down to rich snobbery.

Jake looked at Hank, coming out of his recollections momentarily. "That's funny," he muttered.

"What's that?" said Hank.

"Well, I ups and asks Perez why he wanted me to take the boy and he tells me it was because he wanted the boy away from the scene of his folks' tragedy. Said it might be bad for the boy to stay around so close to where they was murdered."

Hank commented, "So, what is strange about that?"

Jake squirmed for a better position in the chair and continued, "I guess what makes it thataway now is because I ain't being swayed by his fancy talk. See, if he wanted to that man could have sent young Juan to Spain or anywhere. But no, he chose a ragtag, goat-eared Texican like me. Now why would a man do that?"

Hank replied swiftly, "Maybe 'cause you fit his plans for the boy better, Jake."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that maybe he thought you'd return to this wild land and both of you would perish or simply disappear. I have a hunch he thought young Juan would get lost somewhere in Texas and that for some reason, having found out the boy is alive and near, he wants Juan's scalp."

The breath went out of Jake slowly. Things were falling into place slowly. What Hank said made a lot of sense but he still couldn't figure a motive. But why else would a man send a boy with a wild, dangerous gringo he knew nothing about, except that he lived in that wild place called Texas?

"Send for Juan," Jake ordered.

In a short space, Juan was standing in the doorway. His eyes showed him to be wary, not at all trusting Jake. The last time he'd been summoned he'd left nursing a sore mouth.

Jake waved a calloused hand over at a chair. "Sit down," he commanded.

Juan took the chair. Both men watched him with open admiration as he walked, his steps as light and graceful as that of a cat. He slipped into the chair easily.

Jake, never a man to beat about the bush with anything, bluntly told Juan all he and Hank had discussed, their suspicions and their inability to arrive at any satisfactory conclusions. While Jake was telling Juan all of this the youth began to get nervous. A frank look of puzzlement appeared on his face.

He leaned forward in his chair suddenly. What he had to say was startling. "Senor Jake, are you telling me that when you took me you had no knowledge of who I was? And that you only knew me to be an orphan whose parents were murdered? Is this so?" The fires glowed in the young man's eyes.

Jake, his forehead creased with perplexity, answered, "Well, I knew you were Perez's nephew. Didn't think much about who you were, boy. All I could go by was what Perez told me."

Juan's silvery laughter caused both men to look at one another in bewilderment. The boy looked at Jake and said, "My uncle, then, has played the both of us for fools, and has done an admirable job."

Jake interrupted, "Just what are you talking about, boy?"

Juan smiled, then began, "My uncle told me that you knew everything. I have thought these many years that you intended to kill me. I considered you a softhearted old fool for not doing your job sooner, but blessed you for having such a heart."

Jake blinked a couple of times. Things were coming too fast for him. He questioned young Juan. "I'm still lost, Juan. Reckon you'd best start back over again."

Juan said, "My parents, whom I believe were ordered murdered by my uncle, were the Delanos of Ortego. A million acres rest under that name and in the lap of the inheritor. I am that one, senor, and my uncle follows me in line of succession for the inheritance. He is also the executor of the estate."

Hank pounded his fist into the arm of the chair. "So that's

it! Sure. Why didn't I think of something like that before?"

Juan continued, "I have been planning to kill you, Senor Jake, and return to take my inheritance. I did not want to kill you but I believed you to be planning my death, you see. I think that I would probably not have been able to do that task when it presented itself before me. I used to shudder when I thought of slaying you, for I have come to look upon you and regard you as a father to me, for such have you been these years."

Jake snorted, not wanting the boy to see his true reaction to his words. He hadn't felt this choked up since he'd lost his favorite horse, a companion of many years, to a chuckhole.

"You just planning on just walking on in there and claiming them million acres?"

Juan smiled again. "No, you have taught me well. You have taught me about the crafty wolf. You have shown me the lairs of animals and how to trap them. Are men so different to catch? I also learned the art of throwing a piece of steel through the air so that it will sink deeply into a tree, or a man. And you have allowed me the free use of your weapons, a fact which I used to marvel at. I have learned all these things."

Juan paused, then concluded, "So, you see, if uncle Perez does not honor my claim then I will have to kill him and any who oppose me there. There will be one other I shall have to deal with, I'm sure."

The utter coolness of the speech, the sureness in the voice, left the men, hardened though they both were, stunned. There was a steel in this youth that became more obvious by the second, a steel that would not break but would bend, then snap back, piercing the hand and heart of any foolish enough to hold it.

Jake rose. He looked at Hank and said, "This Perez sounds like one smart coon. He figures the boy will up and kill me one day and get hanged for the deed. Or if that don't happen, then the boy will get hisself killed one day." Jake looked at Juan, a new light and appreciation in his eyes for the boy. "We'd best

turn in, Juan. Gonna need the rest if we're to start out bright and early." He turned to leave the room.

Juan replied, "Rest? Leave? And what do you mean, we?"

Jake grinned. "You don't think I'd let my onliest kid run off by hisself to do a job that's gonna take the help of a real man, now do you?"

Juan knew there was no use in arguing the matter with Jake. The old man was as stubborn as wetted leather, knotted and dried in the sun. Secretly, he was pleased, glad to have such help. He would need it, and even with Jake's help the outcome was unsure. It would be a dangerous undertaking.

Hank spoke, "Juan, I've business here on the ranch that must be attended to. Every one of the boys is needed or I'd send along some of them, even ride down myself. If you'd be willing to wait a month I can go with a dozen riders."

Juan smiled his appreciation. He replied warmly, "No, Senor Hank. I must go now. I thank you though." He stopped, then asked a question he'd been wanting to ask before but couldn't. "If I am successful, will it be permitted for me to return for the purpose of courting Andrea?"

Hank chuckled. "You got a bargain. All you got to do to qualify is to show up here alive. That seems to me to be a considerable job ahead."

CHAPTER 5

Next morning found Jake standing beside a magnificent bay. A brand new Winchester jutted from the rifle boot affixed to the soft, luxurious saddle. Hanging from the horn was a beautiful, bone-handled double-action Colt revolver. A special, hand-tooled holster nestled the gun in its firm but pliant grip.

Jake eyed everything, trying to appear nonchalant about the whole thing. He looked at the guns with admiration. Pulling the rifle out of the boot he ran his hand over the mirror-smooth stock. Then he undraped the handgun and belt from the saddle.

Walking over to the porch where Hank stood watching, he placed both items there on the porch. Looking up at Hank he

said, "I'm thankin' you, friend, but you'll have to keep these for me until I return. Nuthin' like old friends for a long trip, you know. I ain't likely to have the time to get to know new ones so soon." He turned and went back to the horse. Turning, he grinned at Hank and said, "Reckon I got time to get to know the horse though."

"You, too!" Hank snorted in mock anger. "I tried to get Juan to take some decent shootin' pieces and he ups and tells me my rifle is too shiny and the fancy Colt is too heavy! Then you tell me you like that stovepipe better'n a spankin' new Winchester, and that hog on your leg better'n the finest gun money can buy."

Jake grinned at Hank and said, "Told you I'd take 'em. Just hang on to 'em till I get back from takin' this ranch away from Uncle Perez, huh?" He swung into the saddle with a naturalness only gained from the doing of a thing hundreds of times. He added, "Keep 'em shiny like that for me, will you?"

Juan, silent until now, spoke softly, "I too will be most happy to have your fine gifts when I return, but I am afraid that your large weapon would not fit into my holster." He swung his short, charro jacket aside to reveal a holstered, .32-caliber pistol under his armpit.

Jake roared, "And what are you plannin' on doin' with that thing! We ain't goin' up against cardboard, you know."

Juan, his brown eyes cool, replied, "If the bullet is placed between the eyes it does not matter that it is a small bullet. There are no degrees of death, senor."

Jake choked off a reply, it being too inadequate for the simplicity of Juan's statment. Just how did one answer that? Jake swung the bay's head around and led off.

On the second evening they came onto a small camp. Jake was reluctant to approach the camp but Juan insisted. They rode in with a hello to the camp which was followed by a welcome. When they rode in it was to a greeting of pointed guns. When they dismounted two other men stepped out of the bushes.

One of the men coming from the bushes said, "Ain't nobody with 'em. They's alone."

The leader, a big man with a flame-red beard, offered his apologies. "We was just checkin' to see that you boys weren't tryin' to run one on us. Cain't be too careful in these parts, you know."

Jake mumbled something under his breath. Juan smiled and said, "That is all right. We understand."

There were five of them, tough, with a tendency toward surliness. But they welcomed the company of two strangers, obviously no threat to them, and knowing the two were headed from where they'd just come. Had Juan and Jake been headed towards Texas things might have been a trifle less cordial.

They settled to a meal consisting of beans, beefsteak seared almost black over the open flame, and coffee so strong even Jake had choked. Afterwards they all gathered around the fire to swap tales, news and find out what they could about one another.

Near the latter part of the evening all good will was dispelled in a flash of violent action. It started when one of the men, a tall, gun-hung, whip of a man muttered at Juan.

"Hey Wetback, pour me a cup." It was not a request but a demand. The man had been studying Juan all night, noticing the coolness and complete lack of fear on the part of the boy. It irked him. That a Mex kid should be so calm and unworried while his companion held a penetrating guardedness in his eyes, watching every move, bothered him.

Juan never blinked an eye at the request. He reached for the soot-blackened pot, but instead of pouring the man a cup of coffee he poured a cup and raised it to his own lips. Then he set the cup down on a small rock and looked at the man.

Without raising his voice he said, "If you want you may have the rest of what is in my cup."

The challenge just floated out, unreal in the quietness of the camp. But it was there nevertheless. The redness of the rising blood in the gunman's face proved that it had not been missed. He stood to his feet.

"Kid, you're liable to die, 'less you get that cup here to me right quick."

Juan did not move but kept his eyes on the man; the only noticeable activity was a slow moving away from the fire by all the other men.

The man was quick, there was no denying that. His long arm dropped to his side in a whipping motion. And then Juan went into action. It was beautiful, simplistic motion, with nothing wasted, everything fluid.

Juan had been sitting, legs crossed, before the fire. Had anyone bothered to notice they would have observed that never once did Juan look into the fire or even across it. His angle was to one side and his gaze was either down or at one of the men. Thus, when he moved into action he was able to see clearly.

Juan rolled into the shadows just outside the ring of light spread by the fire. The bullet from the other's gun passed way over his head. Before he'd stopped moving Juan had produced a knife from the sash at his waist. With the easy grace of a professional, as though he'd faced similar situations for years, Juan sent the knife tunneling its way through the darkness and to its mark.

The gunman cried out in surprise as the knife sank deeply into his shoulder. He dropped the gun, then struggled to pick it up again with the other hand. In his world, to quit was to die.

A shot rang out, the bullet striking the fallen gun. The man jerked back, blinking away the dirt flung up into his eyes. Juan walked out of the darkness and kicked the gun away. The small revolver he carried in the shoulder holster was resting carelessly in one brown hand.

He sauntered over to the stony-faced man, grasped his knife and, with a clean straight pull, wrenched it free, though not without a cry of pain from the victim. Juan faced the darkness and announced, "I am not interested in carrying this fight any further."

For a few moments there was only the stillness of the night to answer him. Then, a voice tinged with anger said, "I oughta

knock you in the head, boy!"

Jake stepped out of the darkness, followed by four other men, their hands raised high. Jake held the shotgun leveled at them. His face was dark with anger.

He shook his head and growled, "You ain't gonna last much past the border, boy, if you ain't a mite more careful. You did real fine till that last little stunt of standing real pretty in the light and announcin' you ain't interested in no more war. Now suppose them fellers had other ideas? They had a target a child could hit with his eyes closed."

Juan smiled, "But as you see, my dependence and trust in you was not wrong. You have taken care of that possibility, just as I knew you would."

Jake frowned in consternation at this, not knowing what to say. Finally he shrugged in resignation and mumbled at Juan, "Well, gather that iron out of their pockets and let's get on. We'll leave it all down the trail."

The next day passed with no sign of being followed. They camped for that night and next morning found them moving before the sun had risen. At noon they stopped and ate, the meal consisting of a quail, its head clipped off by an amazing shot from Juan's pistol, and some biscuits Jake had gotten the cook to make up, the outer crust by now having developed the consistency of wood.

Juan spent a few minutes practicing with his knife and pistol, leaving off the firing of any shells because of the noise and for the simple reason of not having any to spare. This forage just might require all their ammunition and then some.

Jake relaxed against a huge bolder as he watched in admiration, the smooth, practiced movements and accuracy of the youth. He'd missed this part of the youngster's abilities, as well as some others. He'd taught Juan how to throw the knife but had quit the lessons after awhile, complaining that the boy would never learn and that he was wasting his time. He grinned at what seemed to him now to have been encroaching senility.

Juan practiced nearly half an hour with the knife. He chose a

cactus, looming high and craggy against the rock-strewn desert, as his target. The plant would not dull his blade and provided a man-sized target.

Juan stood with his back to the plant. In an explosive burst of motion he spun, at the same time shipping the knife at the target. It sank into the plant to the hilt exactly into the dark spot Juan had been throwing for. Then, when he'd retrieved the weapon, he stood with his side facing the target. The knife rested in the sash. In the same easy, incredibly fast motion he sped the weapon into the cactus. The blade struck less than a half inch from the last mark.

Finally satisfied, he began work with the art of drawing the gun and sighting. To Jake, this was the thing fantastic. The boy had the hands of a magician, able to conjure the small gun seemingly from the air. Jake noticed that when he would steady on his mark the extended arm would not have the slightest quiver. He had a feeling that the bullet would have found any target it was aimed at.

Jake could not shake off a growing curiosity. He knew well that the boy could beat him in any contest of weapons, but how badly? Jake had to find out. He rose from his resting place, interrupting Juan's practice.

"Boy, I want to find out a thing or two." Jake walked over in front of the cactus that had served as target for the knife and numerous imaginary bullets.

Juan gave a look of puzzlement at the big man. He knew Jake to be a sometimes unpredictable man. "What is that?" he asked.

Jake explained, "When I blink my eyes next I want you to take that as a signal to draw on me. I'll try and match you. Just like the real thing, boy, only don't you pull no trigger."

Juan laughed, "I have no bullets in the gun anyway."

Jake scowled and said, "Just makin' sure you understand this ain't for real. Testin' your worth, that's all."

When Jake blinked he started for the hip-high Colt in his side. He never got the gun lifted before Juan's gun was leveled at him. Jake signed and said, "This time I want you to pull the

trigger at me as many times as you can before I can line on you." Jake pulled the Colt and ejected the shells into his hand, stuffing them into his tattered vest.

This time Jake did a little better, but still he was not fast enough to even come close to matching Juan. But he was not attempting to match the boy. There were some things you learned only by time and experience. Jake hoped to teach Juan something without the boy having to go through the experience. It could save the boy's life.

He asked, "How many times did you fire before I leveled at you?"

"Four times," replied Juan.

"And where did you hit me?"

Juan frowned, "I shot for your chest. Your heart would have been missing by now."

Jake growled, "And you'd have been layin' on the same ground bleedin' with me, boy, because I'd have downed you."

Juan gave a startled look at Jake and retorted, "That I cannot believe."

"Believe it or not, I'd have nailed you. That peashooter you got would have killed me, I'm certain, but it wouldn't have moved me off my feet too soon. I'd have died on my feet, but I'd have got one shot at you. It would have planted you."

One of the things that made Juan proficient at anything he attempted was his observance of certain things and his willingness to learn from others. Now, as Jake told of his probable death had his encounter been real, he studied what the man said. He'd never considered the fact that a man might live long enough to shoot after he'd been shot in a vital organ, but somehow he knew Jake was not mistaken. The big man would have put him down.

Jake walked over and put his arm on Juan's shoulder. "Boy, I ain't wantin' you to die from stupidity. If you got to use that peashooter, at least know what it will do to a man and what it won't do. Some men would go down with a bullet in their arm but they's some men around who don't quit, not ever. They'll be tryin' to crawl out of hell one second after they're there.

Don't ever forget that."

Juan was thoughtful. He looked up at big Jake and asked, "So what can I do to insure they do not put me in the grave one second after I place them there?"

Jake grinned. He was getting through. "You said something when we set out on this trip about a man with a bullet in the head stayin' put. Apparently you were just talkin' to make wind or you'd have put all four of them bullets in my brain. And if you're good enough to put them there you're good enough to stay alive."

Jake stalked away. Juan thought about the lesson he'd learned, wondering now why he'd never really thought about it like that before. In a moment he too gathered his horse and mounted. He set after the disappearing figure.

CHAPTER 6

They arrived in the sleepy little village of Jarella late in the afternoon. The only greeting was from several dogs yelping at the feet of the horses. It got so bad that they had to dismount and walk the nervous horses.

The arrival of the two finely-mounted heavily-armed riders was not without notice and speculation. In the local cantina, the discussion was being bandied about with the usual earnestness and vigor, characteristic of a small town that sees few strangers.

"I tell you they are on some mission!" The speaker, a swarthy, dusty, part-time farmer, most-of-the-time bandido and occasional husband, sat in a creaky, three-legged chair.

Another, at the same table, ventured, "Perhaps they will ride for the Senor Perez, eh? It is reported the devil is hiring more malos hombres."

Pasqual, the swarthy one, appeared to give this some thought, then replied, "No. They would not be stopping only a day's ride from the hacienda. Perhaps they are looking for someone."

The other said intensely, "Maybe they run from the gringo law! That is it."

Pasqual frowned. "That is possible," he admitted, "but I do

not think so. They do not have the appearance of men who are pursued. They are well-fed and look rested. It was not nervous men who rode in."

Pasqual was well-qualified to make this observation. He had been chased only too often to the point of exhaustion and nervousness by the Federales, the Rurales, and once, the entire populace of a village. A man does not take the time to prepare a meal when he is on the run, neither does he rest easy. Eyes become red-rimmed and soon he is as jumpy as a jackrabbit and as nervous as a cat when a dog is near.

In the middle of the conversation, the men who were the object of the talk tramped in. At least one of them tramped in. That was Jake. Juan followed as silent as a stalking panther, his tread soft and without sound.

They were a striking contrast. Big Jake Muffins had the look of a man who bulled his way through any obstacle. There was an indestructible something about the man, as though he'd been chipped at, hammered on, all to no avail. An air of indifference hung about the man, as though he could batter his way through anything.

In contrast, Juan, at first glance, appeared to be susceptible to the first bad wind that blew. But a closer look revealed the quiet confidence that was cast on his fine-cut features. Then, a look into his fire-bright eyes convinced one that this was a dangerous man, one to be left alone.

A shiver went through Pasqual as those eyes looked into his. He looked away suddenly, feeling the warmth, the heat of that penetrating look. All talk had died slowly.

Juan spoke, using the language of his father. "Please do not fear us. We will be here for some days. We are not after anything here. My gringo friend and I are taking a journey to see a relative of mine."

Nothing was said in answer to this announcement. Jake moved over to a table near the back of the room. Juan followed. When no one appeared at the table to serve them Jake bellowed, "Trot some food out here, hombre!" He shook his

finger at the owner, standing in a small doorway leading to the kitchen. The smell of beans and frying tortillas could be detected.

In a little while they had satisfied the hunger one gets from a long trail, from the eating of cold food, dry bread and wild, often stringy, meat. Jake lounged back in his chair and belched loudly.

"That was mighty fine. I ain't had some of your kind of vittles since I packed your worthless hide out of here."

Juan replied, "This hide may soon not be so worthless."

Jake grinned. "You have a point there, boy, a real point."

Later they found a small room to stay in. It had been previously habited by an old man. The man had died recently. The room stank of unwashed clothing and sickness. They opened the doors, threw the bedding into the street and went back to the cantina to wait until the room was aired out sufficiently.

While they were waiting Pasqual screwed up his courage and sauntered over to their table. He uttered a polite hello.

"What can we do for you?" Juan asked.

"Well," Pasqual began, "I was thinking that if you were going into some adventure that required a light finger and swift feet I should like to join you. I am not busy at the moment, you see."

Jake guffawed loudly. He smacked the table and said, "If that don't beat all! He thinks we're up to some play for dinero and hopes to get some on his sticky fingers."

Juan said smoothly, "And is that not the truth, my friend?" Jake appeared to be taken aback. Juan continued, "We will need all the help we can obtain and I've a feeling that this fellow will be able to help us somewhere in our venture." He motioned for Pasqual to sit down.

When the latter had rested his frame on a not-too-sturdy chair Juan said, "I cannot tell you yet of our mission here but only that it is extremely dangerous. Do you still want in?"

Pasqual nodded, then exclaimed, "I have been near danger before. Death has sniffed my heels, senores."

Juan whispered, "If you would aid us it could gain you many riches and it would be legally yours. But if you are caught it will mean death."

Juan talked long to Pasqual that evening and he discovered the many talents of the man. Although he did not yet know how Pasqual could help he felt that the man could prove to be of some use to them. Also, he trusted Pasqual.

Jake commented, "Just go easy, boy. You're playin' with old Jake's life here too, you know."

Juan nodded. "I am aware of that and will not place your person in any danger. Pasqual here will aid us. We will use him and he will not betray us."

They stayed in the little town for several days. Juan questioned Pasqual, who was a walking dictionary of facts, about recent events, the Perez riders and the land about them. He made many rides with Pasqual into the countryside learning the hidden dangers of the land, the best advantages of concealment and also the temper of the local people.

He discovered that there was little love for Perez even among many of the vaqueros riding for him. The man was a cruel overlord, merciless in his dealings with the peons. Debt burdens rested upon the heads of many of the people, some having passed debts onto their children when they died.

The day arrived when Juan decided they would move out of the village and into the nearby mountains. It would not do for a rider of his uncle to discover them there in the village. Reluctantly they left, the children running along beside the horses, yelling and calling adios.

In just a few hours the pair found themselves at the fringe of the mountains. They rode into the rock-strewn, pine-thick mountains slowly, picking their way carefully. There was no desire to go high or far, only high enough to spot any approaching riders and far enough to be well-hidden.

Camp was made in a grassy spot with a mountain stream gurgling its way down the side of the mountain, sheltered by spruce and wild mountain pine. It was a secure place in spite of its beauty. A huge boulder rested here and there, giving a

natural windbreak and fortification, should that be necessary.

Jake hunkered over the small fire Juan made, passing huge, rock-hard hands over the flames, warming them against the chill of the mountain air. Juan stirred a simmering liquid soup made from a squirrel the youth had shot out of a tree earlier in the day. Neither had said much on the ride up, saving it for the evening.

Jake looked up at Juan and asked, "What are you planning, boy? Shore now, we ain't gonna sit up on this mountain too long." Jake's impatience showed in his tone. His manner was direct. In fact, his idea was to ride in, blow a hole into Perez and take over. It just never occurred to the big man that it was possible he would not be able to do exactly that.

Juan smiled. "Senor," he began, "I am going to take a part of your suggestion. In the morning I shall ride down into the valley and visit my uncle."

Jake choked on a swallow of the hot soup he'd ladled out into a tin cup. "Boy, I told you wrong!" he growled. "You can't go in there and do the job. They'd cut you down. Now me, they ain't expectin' and besides, I got a plan how I can get near Perez." Jake took a bite of squirrel from the soup and continued, "I just tell them that I'm lookin' for you."

Juan said, "But I am not going to kill my uncle. I am just going to tell him that unless he gives up the ranch to me that I shall take it and that he shall hang."

Jake shook his head. "Boy, you didn't learn a thing I ever taught you, did you? You don't go askin' a snake to hold still so's you can blow its head off. You just take aim and pull the trigger!"

Juan replied, a smile lifting one side of his mouth, "I must do it my way, senor."

Jake rose from the fire, the ease of the move revealing the strength and superb balance of the man. He ran his fingers through his hair and said, "All right boy, if that's the way it's gotta be. Only, there just ain't no way I'll let you go deliver that polite little speech. Gotta be me or I'll hogtie you to a pine."

Juan knew one thing about Jake for certain. When the man's mind was made up there was nothing he knew about on earth that could change it. He dared the big man's quickness to use the shotgun but more than that he feared for his safety. Juan knew Jake would never let him go so it remained for Jake to go.

Juan sighed and said, "Bien, amigo. Only please do not be scattering my uncle about with your big gun."

Jake grinned and the two shook hands. It was going to be a tomorrow full of uncertainty and danger.

CHAPTER 7

Noon the following day saw Jake at the gate of the villa. A questioning by the guard posted there brought a quick response. It also brought someone else to the gate. This man was obviously one of some importance on the rancho. A slash of a mouth served to heighten the cruelty mirrored in his black, glistening eyes. There was something disturbingly familiar about the man.

He eyed Jake curiously. "Explain your presence here, senor. It is not the hour of visiting, you know."

Jake grinned. He knew well that this was the siesta time and that was exactly why he'd chosen to ride in at that time. He hoped to attract little attention. If a ruckus started he might stand more of a chance of getting through if all the men were resting and at leisure. It upped the odds for him a hair, he figured.

"Get your boss outa bed. Tell him Jake Muffins is here to talk with him." He paused, then added, drawling the words, "Tell him it's about a certain brat he left in my care that I want to talk about."

This produced a response. The slender, scar-faced man reacted to the announcement with a narrowing of the eyes. He also shifted his position to get a closer look at this big, rough-hewn old man. He was remembering.

"Follow me," he ordered.

Jake dismounted and left his mare with the guard at the gate.

They walked to the house, Jake keeping close behind. At the porch of the beautiful, spacious hacienda the man stopped and turned. He looked at Jake, then to the scattergun dangling loosely in Jake's hand.

He said politely, "Will your visit require that, senor?"

It was as though he'd said nothing, for there was no response from Jake. He acted as though the man were not even there. Jake eyed the house in appreciation.

It enraged the slender Mexican instantly. He was not used to being ignored.

He demanded, "You will put the gun on the porch!"

Jake looked the man in the eye. He'd been busy mapping the place in his mind and had paid little attention to the man. Tonelessly he said, "You're about the only thing I'm likely to leave on this porch, Pablo." Jake's face was as hard as the words he'd thrown in the man's face.

Had Jake been anyone else, had he been any the less proficient-looking and had he not carried that business-looking greener, then Lorenzo Diaz, creature of stealth, dealer of death, brutal and merciless to one and all, would certainly have leaped for the throat of this insulting challenge of a man.

Never had he allowed his person to be insulted in such a manner and this monster-sized gringo would pay the full price for his foolishness. Once business was concluded and the need for him no longer existed, then Diaz would exact his dues from this man.

As this lean, deadly-looking man stood gazing at him with wet black eyes Jake felt something sweep through him gently; a feeling that had only come to him once in his life previously. Once in Texas near the border, he'd accidentally bowled William Bonney head over heels into the dust of the street. The poison in Bonney had come spewing forth, ugly, vile, murderous. A gentle uneasiness, a fear, had swept through Jake that day. But Bonney's friends had gathered him and hustled him off the street. They were not anxious to flee the town at the moment. The reason became more apparent a day later when they robbed the bank and fled into Mexico.

That same feeling was with him now. It bothered him. This was one of the most dangerous men Jake Muffins had ever faced in his life and he'd faced his share. He'd not hesitate to tangle with this viper but he didn't relish the thought. Something told him he might come off second best. And with this one, being second meant being dead.

So, because it suited his purposes, Diaz ignored Jake's insult, at least outwardly. With a faint sneer he said, "I will bring the Senor. You will not run away?"

In a moment Perez came out on the porch. He wore a rich, supple purple robe. A thin, black cigar jutted arrogantly from his thin bloodless lips. A pencil-thin mustache lined his upper lip, giving him an even darker appearance than he would normally have suggested. Gray clustered at the temples where jet black hair had once rested. He seemed perpetually amused, as though life were a big joke. His hands were thrust deep into the folds of the robe. Jake didn't doubt for an instant that he clutched a gun there.

"Senor Muffins. How good to see you again, after these many years." The false warmth sounded ridiculous in the tenseness of the moment.

Jake watched the man warily. "Tell your pet snake there to disappear for awhile."

Perez shook his head slowly. "I am very sorry, but my pet snake, as you call him, does not leave my side when danger is about. Besides, he knows everything I know about my business."

Jake nodded. "All right, I will get to the point then. I represent young Juan. I am to tell you that you have three weeks to set your business in order and leave the premises, never to return. After that, you and any man working for you will be free game. Juan states further that since you have no legal claim to the land or any part of it, then you are trespassing and therefore he will shoot on sight anyone and everyone he does not want on his land, including you."

Jake had rehearsed this speech of Juan's carefully. The youngster had insisted that it be word for word, nothing more,

nothing less. So Jake had complied. It wasn't Jake's way to throw a warning at an enemy. His way would have been to simply ambush Perez without warning. But he'd given his word to the boy to do it his way. Of course, if things started to run poorly Jake reckoned he could forget his word, at least temporarily, and do it his way.

Perez's face blanched. He grimaced, then said, "Is that pup around here? We will see how dogs act when they are under the whip."

Jake said drily, "Reckon you don't know Juan. He's a curly wolf. Ain't no puppy left in that boy."

Diaz spat, contempt stamped on his features. The spittle made a little poof where it hit the ground near the edge of the porch. He said, "And what are you? Are you a terrible old bear?"

The reckless heat of battle was filling Jake. He wanted to do it his way now. But he'd given his word and he'd keep it. At least he'd try. Men like Diaz made it difficult though.

Jake pushed back in spite of himself. "Any time you want to start this little fandango I'm ready. This old bear is ready to eat hisself a skunk, in spite of the smell."

Jake's eyes suddenly shifted to Perez. "You move that hand another inch and I'll open you up all over that fancy porch you're standin' on. I'd hate to break my word to the boy but if you try me with that thing you got tucked away in that dress you're wearin' I'm going to break more than my word."

Perez inched his hand away from the gun. "There will be another time, gringo." Certainty rang in his voice.

Jake stepped back a foot. He wasn't at all sure how to extract himself from this now that he'd delivered his speech. It looked like he was going to have to take a hostage to insure his safety. But it turned out that wasn't going to be at all possible, for a voice behind him ended all ideas.

"You will place the big gun on the ground, senor. I stand with a rifle looking at your broad, ugly back. I cannot miss."

The look of triumph was ugly on Perez's face. But it was a

trifle premature. Especially when one is dealing with a man like Jake Muffins.

The clear, snapping sound of the ear of one barrel on the greener broke the look on Perez's face. It had the added effect in that the barrel just happened to be pointing in Perez's general direction. The butt of the gun rested lightly on Jake's thigh.

"Alto!" The command to stop was shouted at the rifleman behind Jake. Jake had said nothing, but the action he had taken told loud and clear that if he died he'd certainly take Perez with him. The big man would pay for the privilege, but he was prepared to do so. Perez was not ready to die for Jake's own demise though.

The rifle was lowered, but held ready.

"Git that trigger-happy, back-shootin' peon of yours in front of me, Perez!" Jake demanded.

Perez nodded to the man. As soon as he'd stepped to the front of Jake the big man leaned forward, a big fist cut the air and landed alongside the man's jaw. He went down without a sound, too surprised to have moved aside.

"I hate a backshooter worse'n poison," was Jake's proferred explanation.

At this moment someone else chose to reveal his presence. Juan stepped into view from behind the shubbery. He walked calmly over to the group. It was as much a surprise to Jake as it was to the others.

Jake roared, "Boy, now what are you doing here?" A thought struck him and a new anger ran through him. "How long you been here?" he asked darkly.

Juan smiled. "All the time."

"And you let that rat put a gun on my back without doing nothing? I ought to break your arm, you faithless pup."

Juan shrugged. "I would not have allowed it but I was anxious to see what my gringo father would do in such a situation. I wanted to see if it would be the same as what I would have done."

Jake calmed, grinned at the impudence of the youth and the

curiosity of the idea. He asked, "And was it?"

Juan looked thoughtful a moment, then said, "No, I do not think so. I am quite sure I would have fallen to the ground and killed him before he changed his aim or even pulled the trigger. He would not be expecting such a move, you see."

Jake shook his head in disgust. "I ain't learned you a thing, have I? Always wantin' to take the glory way." He looked over to Perez who was standing, watching everything, somewhat amused.

Jake remarked, mostly as an afterthought, "And what did you expect them pair of snakes on the porch to be doin'? Were they just going to lay down on the porch?"

In a matter-of-fact, and curiously confident, tone, Juan replied, "I think, yes, they most certainly would have done that. They would have laid down on the porch and died." Juan paused, his eyes shifting hard over to Diaz. He said softly, "Especially that one." His eyes fastened onto the wet, black ones of Diaz.

"Well, talkin' ain't goin' to get us anywhere. If I'd knowed you was going to be here I'd have let you do all the fancy talkin'. I can see now it was just a ruse you was usin' to test your uncle's reaction so you could kill him without feelin' too bad about it." Jake shuffled his feet, impatience showing in him. He added, "Be any comfort to you I'll do the chore for you." Jake had arrived at what to him was a perfectly simple and logical conclusion to it all.

"No, my big friend. We do not kill them. I have given my word that they have three weeks. I will not harm anyone until that time comes. Only after that can we hunt them as the wolf hunts the deer." The fire flickered wickedly in Juan's eyes.

"You mean you're going to let them go!" Jake exploded. "Boy, you ain't right in the head. I been thinkin' you got the makin's but I can see now I been estimating you wrong. When you got a snake under your boot you don't let it up. You stomp on it." His eyes searched Juan's face for sign of agreement. He

pleaded, "We took them fair and square. They had their chance."

"Did you not come under the gate with the explanation you wanted to talk?"

Jake nodded.

"Then to slay them now would be a breach of honor. It matters not that they would have slain you. My father taught me early that the word of a gentleman and a man is never broken. Not even to snakes such as these."

Jake's face was as red as burnt brown can get. Only one other person had ever put Jake in his place like that and that was a woman. He'd chased her down a street threatening to paddle her. Truth hurt sometimes. Man just couldn't get around words put like that.

Jake sighed, then announced softly, "Aw, I was just trying to get these boys a little green around the gills, kid. You'd stumble over a dyin' man's last drink of water, you know that? Gotta spoil everything." He shook his head at the young man in resignation and disappointment.

Juan focused his attention on Perez. "Uncle, I want you to realize the ease with which I came to your house. What I have done once I can do again. But the next time I come to this house will be to shoot trespassers." Juan stepped suddenly back into the shadows. A pistol had appeared smoothly from beneath the vest.

"Diaz, you will take your weapon and slide it off the porch. Uncle, you will take the gun in your robe and do the same." Juan was no longer polite.

The orders were complied with quickly. The slender Mexican youth scooped the weapons up and hurled them off into the thick shrubbery. He looked a moment at the two, then, with Jake right behind him, stepped out of sight. They hurried to the gate before the alarm could be given. Soon they were thundering out and onto the broad grassland around the villa. The mountains beckoned and loomed in the distance, a welcome shelter. A home for the next few weeks.

CHAPTER 8

Careful inquiry by Juan revealed that Perez had posted a 200 peso reward for their capture, dead or alive. Cheap, but for even that little, Perez guessed the peons would turn in their own mothers. The man did not count on the hate and contempt the peons held for him, nor did he consider the awe and fear they had toward the giant gringo and his scattergun. The wildness that glittered from the eyes of the young one also acted as a warning.

Juan already had ridden into several villages and announced his ownership of the land and that Perez would soon hang. He also enlisted the aid of some of the men of the villages and together they proceeded to steal several herds of cattle. The promise to the men that they could have everything they stole was too much for them to pass up.

One of the cattle raids found Jake and Juan burdened with the task of guarding five of his uncle's riders. They had been tending the herd. The men were tied and placed in a crumbling, sun-baked adobe hut with half its roof missing.

Outside, Juan and Jake sought the only shade offered, a huge rotting cactus nearby. It was better than the stifling 'dobe hut and more private for conversation. Juan made his way to a sandy spot in the narrow shade and quickly squatted Indian fashion. Jake walked over to the cactus and began scraping one side. There was a day when he could have sat for hours without any sort of brace but now he had to make some comforts along the way. He sat down heavily, sliding to get his back against the trunk of the plant. Suddenly Jake leaped up, with a yell that sounded more like a bull's bellow. One hand was feeling gingerly at the seat of his pants.

Juan laughed. "Want me to get it out?" he asked in mock sympathy.

Jake replied, "You just sit tight, boy. I been stuck by a lot worse than a cactus and never needed anyone to unstick me then." He stole a glance at Juan's face and added, "And wipe that silly grin off your face or you'll be resting on top of this thorny weed!"

He extracted a slender, needle-sharp sliver. After examining it a brief moment and feeling about for more he satisfied himself that it was safe to sit down, but not before scanning the ground quickly. He'd scraped the needles off the cactus only to sit on one. Things had a way of reminding you how old you were.

Juan looked at the makeshift prison. He said, "I think three days ought to give Garcia and the boys enough of a start. Think so?"

"Wouldn't give any less," Jake answered.

Juan was silent for a moment, then spoke, "It is going to take more supplies than we have to stay here for that time. Also, we must feed the prisoners."

Jake grunted. It wasn't in his nature to give an enemy a thing in the way of mercy. But this was the boy's fandango and he was silent. He'd do it Juan's way until that way didn't work. Then, providing it wasn't too late, Jake would do things his way. A mite bloody, but efficient.

Juan said, "I will go into the little village near the ranch and bring supplies. It will not take me very long."

Jake grunted again, pulled his hat over his eyes, cradled the greener like a baby and prepared himself for a long vigil. Juan, without another word, rose effortlessly and in a few moments was riding toward the village.

Juan rode for over an hour before he sighted the little village. He would rather have gone to one a little farther from the ranch headquarters but that meant a ride of several hours.

It was dark when Juan entered the little town. The smell of burning oil from numerous lamps drifted across his nostrils. Flickers of light escaped here and there from beneath doors and windows. A lone dog started barking and there followed a chorus of yelping, scarrered barking, and moon howls.

A door cracked open and he saw it close quickly. Down farther he spied a curtain move as someone peeped out. Juan kneed his horse to the left side of the street, reining him in at the edge of the porch-like affair in front of a sun-baked mud house. He dismounted, tying the reins loosely to the near post.

Something did not feel right. There was a vague disturbing feeling in the pit of Juan's stomach. Maybe it was the way everyone had peeked at him, no one daring to swing a door open wide or fling back a curtain. It could have been the quietness when he'd entered. He wasn't sure. But something was bothering him.

He decided not to enter the front door. With a step as soft as any Indian, Juan moved to the back of the building. He'd just made the back when he heard a muffled whisper.

"Do not return until I wave the light slowly. Now hurry!" A young girl and two small children hurried out the door and disappeared into the desert.

Juan stepped into the door entrance before it could close. A startled gasp and a piteous groan sounded.

"Oh senor, please do not harm my family. Let us alone, please."

Juan put his hand on the shoulder of the old, now weeping man. He said softly, "I have come for food, grandfather. I shall pay gladly for anything you give me."

The white-haired, wrinkled-faced old man looked up at Juan. "Food?" he asked.

"Yes, food. Do you have any to sell?"

The old man asked, "You want only food, senor? Nothing more?"

Juan, growing impatient, snapped, "Yes! I told you that. Now quickly. I do not have all night."

The man scurried into the interior of the house. "Come with me," he said.

Juan followed him into a large, dimly-lit room. He ordered his plump wife to fetch some food, supposing Juan would be eating there.

"No, old man. I want much food and I want it to take with me. It is for many men." Juan stood in the center of the room, hands on his hips.

The slender man, bowed by age, said weakly, "But we do not have much food. To receive such as you want would require

that we own the store across the street. There they have many things. The senor Perez, he owns it and he will sell you all the food you need."

Juan's eyebrows rose. So this was one of the ways Perez kept the peons in servitude to him. Keep them in debt, make them work for nothing, paying off accumulating debts.

"Is there anyone there in the store now?" asked Juan.

"No, it is past the hour for buying, but for you I am sure senor Gomez will open. He runs the store for the Senor."

Juan smiled grimly, "Yes, I am sure he would open for me. Lead me to this Gomez fellow."

The old man turned to go. Juan stopped him, curious about something. "Tell me," he asked, "why did you push your children out into the desert to hide when you saw me ride up?"

The old man cringed, then said, "You do not ride for the Senor?"

Juan shook his head. The old fellow said softly, "There are times when some of the men from the rancho ride here. They come about this hour after working."

"And why do you fear these men?" Juan questioned.

"Because they are vicious dogs. Last week they fought amongst themselves and wrecked a poor friend's house and injured his little boy. The boy got in the way and one of the vaqueros kicked him aside."

Juan's eyes were flickering with that fire now. "And do these men ride here often?"

"Usually about once a week, sometimes oftener. We were expecting them tonight as they have not been to visit for nearly seven days now."

"The last time there were only three. Other times maybe six will come."

Juan walked to the door and stepped out into the night. He walked to his horse, untied the reins and led the horse to the back of the house. Then he turned to the old man. "What do they call you?"

"I am Pablo, senor."

"Well, Pablo, this is what I want for you to do. If these men arrive I do not want you to let them know you have seen me. Also, I do not want you to tell this Gomez that I am here. I will find the man for myself later." He looked into the desert, then added, "Are the children safe there? They will not get too cold?"

"Oh no. They have done this thing many times now. Always they come in after we are sure the men will not be arriving."

Juan patted the old man's shoulder and bade him goodnight. Then he drifted into the shadows of the desert with his horse. The door closed and all was once more silent. Juan tied the horse after leading him a good ways into the desert. He crept back and sat in the sand just on the edge of the town, behind Pablo's house. He hoped fiercely the men would come tonight.

They came. It was a wild entrance, with much shouting, cursing and some firing of pistols. Dust boiled as they raced through the little town, then back down the center of the street, pulling their mounts back on their haunches near Pablo's house.

One of them yelled, "Hey old man! Make ready! We will visit your house tonight."

Another galloped down the street a bit and called out, "Gomez! Mendez! Fetch us something to drink. Hurry and bring it to the old man's place." He wheeled his horse back around and raced down the street. The others were all rolling off their mounts. They jangled into the house of Pablo, arrogant, careless and indifferent to the pleas of the old man to go elsewhere.

The men had other lanterns brought over, there not being enough light to see well. Also, they ordered several houses notified that they were expected to come and join the evening festivities. Those were the houses containing young women of the village.

There were seven men tonight. One, a leader of sorts, was tall, his body lean and stringy. A shaggy mustache dropped well

below his jaws and a big hooked nose jutted from the face. Bandoleeras crossed his chest, with a pistol shoved into the front of his dirtied, yellow sash about his middle. A floppy, Mexican sombrero hung from a blackened piece of rawhide. The hat rested on his back, out of the way. His dark eyes sought out his host.

"Pablo!" he snarled.

The little man scurried over to the table they had commandeered. The lean rider eyed Pablo closely. "I have heard that you have a daughter. But I have never seen so much as her back. I would look on her face, old man." A leer passed over the man's face as he glanced at his comrades and laughed.

Pablo cringed, his whole body quivering. "I have no daughter," he managed.

A hand shot out striking Pablo full in the chest. He flew back, slamming into a wall. He staggered back, gaining his balance. Surprisingly enough it gave him control of his fear. All fear of this man had gone.

"Now, you don't want to die, do you, old man?" The wicked gleam of promise escaped from the eyes of Madero.

Pablo answered, "No, but I no longer fear you, animal."

Madero rose slowly from his seat. "So, the old man has gotten the heart of the bull, eh? Perhaps when we find his daughter he will not speak so bravely."

He walked over to Pablo near the wall. He reached out and slapped the old man hard in the mouth. Pablo's head rocked to the side. Blood trickled down one corner of his mouth.

Just then Madero spied the old woman. He ordered one of the men, "Bring that old piece of shoe leather over here."

The woman was shoved over to the wall next to her husband. Madero looked at her and said, "You will tell me where your daughter is or I will cut your man's tongue out." He drew a gleaming blade from beneath his short jack.

Pablo's wife looked hard at Madero, then spat into the man's face. For a full second the act did not register with Madero. The

spittle ran down his face, past the beaked nose and into his moustache. With an obvious attempt to do murder, he swept the knife at the woman's face. But she stepped back and ran for the back door. A rider stepped into her path and grabbed her. Madero stalked to the center of the room. He was going to kill the woman.

Pablo tried to reach the man, knowing what was about to happen. But a man grabbed him by the wrists and held him firm. He stood helpless. Madero advanced until he was standing before Pablo's wife.

He grabbed her by the hair and said, a hiss coming into his voice, "You will never spit again, old fool. It is your tongue I am going to cut out."

A voice cut through the pregnancy of the moment, causing Madero to halt his actions with the moment. "If you move even your eyelash I will place a bullet where your eyes meet your ugly nose." Death and promise were in that voice.

Madero chanced a look and saw a slim figure, no more than a youth, standing carelessly just within the back doorway. One hand rested against the doorsill, the other held a pistol. It was cocked and pointing directly at him. Madero had a feeling that if the gun went off it would find its way to exactly the point the young man had suggested it would.

Juan moved into the room, careful to stay out of the center of the room. He wanted everyone right where he could see them. He commanded, "Ugly Nose, you will release the woman and then come over to me. Do everything very slowly or you will die very quickly."

Madero released the grip on the hair and stepped away from her. He still held the knife. Idly, he wondered what the chances were for a quick throw and a daring leap to the side. He decided that it would not do. The fire in those eyes were turning the steel in his nerves to a soft jelly.

When he was near Juan, the latter reached out and took the knife. Without any warning he whipped his arm back and sent the knife flashing across the room. It struck solidly into the

shoulder of the rider who had been holding the old woman. The man staggered back.

"You will not be able to fight old women now," Juan said drily. He looked across the room at the man still holding Pablo. "I have a bullet that will reach your shoulder, or maybe your head."

The man stepped back as though burnt by the touch of the old man. Pablo hurried over to his wife's side. Juan, his gun never wavering from Madero's temple, moved back into the darker part of the room.

"You will step over here, old ones." The two hurried over with him.

Juan spoke to Madero. "Tell your companeros to ride out of here, except for the fellow sitting at the table there." Juan pointed with his pistol at a slim, young rider.

Madero looked questioningly at this hard-faced, fire-eyed young man. He longed to have this youth standing in front of his gun sight or under a sharp blade. Then he would see how bold he looked at them all.

The hesitation brought a sharp command from Juan, "Do as I say now! If I wait another minute for them to leave you will not be alive to see their departure."

Madero glowered, not frightened, but not wanting to push it. His time would come. "Get out of here!" he growled, one long arm sweeping out in dismissal. The riders, all anxious to leave the threat of the pistol in Juan's hand, pushed their way through the door.

Juan turned his attention to the young rider sitting at the table. "I asked you to remain so that you could take the body with you." He smiled, then continued, "Also, I want you to take a message for me. Tell my uncle and all of the riders that this dog that calls himself a man is only the beginning."

He turned slightly, his body facing both men. "You will place your weapons on the floor and slide them over near the door." To Madero he said, "Place your pistol where you can reach it fastest." Juan still held his gun out, not trusting anyone. The

heavy sliding of a gun sounded as the seated rider complied with the order. Madero made sure his pistol was loose.

"Am I to wait until you shoot me before I draw?" questioned Madero with a sneer.

Juan grinned. "It might be interesting to do it that way. I have a friend who would probably choose that method. He once told me that snakes shouldn't be told that you're about to stomp on them."

"You talk so much I think I will put the bullet in your mouth," said Madero.

Juan stepped back one step and slid the gun into the worn holster under his arm. A sudden change came over him. It was as though all the vitality of his being had surfaced, charging him, setting him aquiver. But most of the change could be seen in his eyes. They were bright, alive, thirsty. The flame of battle was in him and would not be quenched except by the letting of blood.

Madero paled before this change, but being a tried warrior of many battles and having a measure of courage, he shook himself and fought off a tremor that sought to race through his entire frame. He was ready.

He was also good. The best that the relatively inexperienced Juan had ever gone up against. The man was so good that his gun was nearly out of the holster before Juan even started his draw. You just could not allow such a lead with a man like Madero, no matter how good you were.

Juan was a blur of motion, his reflexes panther-quick. He knew he'd made a mistake when he glanced quickly at the table to insure the young rider's neutrality. The gunman had gone into action in that instant.

Drawing from the shoulder holster has several advantages, one of them being the ability to draw from nearly any position. Juan went into a crouch even as he was drawing. A bullet whoomed its way beside his head. Madero, firing with the ease and instinct of the trained fighter he was, had compensated automatically as Juan fell into the crouch. Had he tried to shoot

for the stomach he probably would have hit the youth. But he'd tried to make good his boast of hitting the mouth. That made one mistake apiece. Last man to make a mistake in this kind of game died.

Juan's first bullet caught him in the center of the chest, the second in the forehead. The man fell forward without a sound. Juan stood slowly, suddenly weak with the overcharge of emotion. He would never make the mistake of taking his eyes off the enemy again. He'd been a foolish child this night. He would make sure Jake did not learn of the details of this fight.

Juan walked to the table where the other man was still seated. He said softly, "Take him and go." Juan looked back at where Madero lay. "Tell them he was good. Maybe better than Diaz even. But not good enough."

He walked out into the coolness of the night. He felt elated with the sweetness of life that was nearly extinguished. As he lounged against a post he saw the blanket-wrapped figure dragged out. A struggle to heave the body onto the back of the nervous horse proved to be too much for the rider.

He finally tied the feet of the horse, then wrapped a neck scarf around the eyes of the animal. With an enormous heave he threw the body across the saddle. A wet, soppy sound came. The blanket was soaked with blood. The rider lashed the body down, took the blind and the rope from the hooves off and leaped into his own saddle. He leaned down and took the lead reins of the other horse.

As he passed by the still, peaceful figure leaning against the post, he pulled up. He called to Juan. "You are really Juan Delano?" he asked.

Juan nodded. The other said, "If you are really Juan Delano then I, Roberto Miranda, am not an enemy to you. My father knew your parents for many years." Roberto lowered his voice and said softly, his voice barely a whisper, "I know who it was who killed your parents."

Juan came off the post alert and tensed. A trap? A lure, somehow? He peered intently into the other's moonlit face.

"Do not joke with me or seek to betray me somehow, Roberto. It is dangerous to say such things unless you speak the truth."

Roberto frowned and repeated, "I tell you I know who killed your parents! My father told me just a year ago. I speak the truth."

Juan asked, "Tell me then, who did this deed?" His voice was peculiarly high-pitched. He could not restrain the emotion that coursed through him.

Roberto looked about him carefully, leaned down and whispered the name into Juan's ear.

Juan stepped back, a groan of pure hatred escaped him. He said, his voice cracking with emotion, "I felt it. I felt it. When I was near him I felt it."

Roberto said quickly, "You will not tell that I am the one who gave you this news? My father lives in fear daily that he will be discovered as the one the murderer saw running away that night."

Juan, his emotions under control, replied, "If your father were going to be suspected he would have died long ago, believe me. But I shall honor your request and when I take my ranch you will be given a top position. This I promise!"

Roberto waved a goodbye and walked the horses into the night. Juan returned to the house, grabbed a few supplies Pablo had gotten from Gomez and hurried to his horse. Jake would be getting worried as he was way overdue. No, Jake would not be worried, thought Juan. He would be furious. Juan leaped into the saddle and rushed into the night.

CHAPTER 9

Dawn came with the slow shimmering of the sun across the jutting, short mountains. A golden wave of light filtered its way through the tree tops and discovered the face of the sleeping Jake. He had slept long and deep.

Jake stretched, then rose. The coffee of several hours ago tasted harsh and grainy in his mouth now. He eyed the pot of simmering, hours-old coffee speculatively, gave in with a sigh

and poured half a cup. It tasted like his mouth.

He looked over to the 'dobe ruins. He could see dark forms just inside. Apparently the warning that he was going to blow away the first body that set foot out the crumbling door was taken seriously. These were vaqueros, not fighters, and he really hadn't expected any trouble.

Juan was not back and it worried Jake. The distance was not so great that it should have taken him all night. Sure as anything the boy had gone sneaking around the ranch and gotten caught! Jake knew what they'd do if Juan were in their hands. It wouldn't be nice.

The big man had patience, yet when it came to some things he was a most impatient man. He could wait for hours for game to come to a watering hole. Once a war party of Comanches had come upon him suddenly, each as surprised as the other. Jake had eluded them and taken refuge in some tall plains grass. The Indians had ridden back and forth for hours in the grass, yelling, screaming and taunting him, hoping that he would be frightened into moving and betraying his position. He'd not moved a muscle for over six hours then.

Now Jake was impatient. He wanted to get at the job before them. He yearned for action. Also, the missing Juan bothered him more than he cared to admit. The lad could be in serious trouble, needing his help this very minute.

Finally he could stand it no longer and saddled his horse. He decided to take the route Juan would be most likely to return on. While he wasn't as sure of the country as Juan seemed to be, he figured that he knew it well enough to figure out Juan's trail.

But Jake saw nothing in his descent and passed only a few cattle near the ranch grounds. Stopping in the village, Jake was told that Juan had come and gone. Nothing was said about the gunfight. Jake headed for the ranch. If Juan was hurt, or worse, Jake vowed silently to pull the trigger on everyone who crossed his path in that ranch house.

A high wood fence encircled the grounds, barring entrance.

It was not going to be easy, this getting over the fence. A few years ago it would have posed no problem, but now his bulk and age promised to make it a real chore. He decided to find an easy way, if there was one.

There was. It meant making a flexible, makeshift ladder from his rope, but that was easily done. When he had the ladder made he stood his horse next to the fence and tossed one end of the ladder over the fence, leaving a short section hanging over on his side. He adjusted the rungs to hang between the pointed tops of two of the planks. He hoped the boards would support his weight.

They did. Jake got over, hanging and dropping the last few feet to the ground. He nearly dropped his greener but made a lucky grab. With the stealth of an Indian he went in the direction of the house. He wondered if there were any dogs on the grounds. He'd not noticed any on the first visit.

Shortly, he came to the edge of a small garden which bordered the side of the house. In spite of the tenseness of the situation and the danger of the moment, Jake paused a moment to appreciate the beauty and fragrance of the garden.

For nearly an hour he lay under a short, thick hedge, watching, observing, and looking for any sign of Juan. A few workers passed from time to time, but no one of any real importance. Strangely enough, there was no sign of any guards or armed men anywhere. Perhaps they all went cow chasing, Jake hoped.

Only the natural suspicious nature of the man, strengthened by years of danger in a wild land, kept him from moving any closer. He felt that it was safe but he was not anxious to put himself into anything he was not really sure about. He felt that he needed to study the situation more.

Within the house there was little activity. The reason for the absence of any armed movement on the ranch grounds was because practically every man was at this moment within the large house. It was here, much against the wishes of Diaz, that Perez decided to set his trap. Let Juan and the gringo come. They would find it a simple matter to enter the grounds. It

would not be so easy to leave.

Every room held guards. The balconies within were filled with men. Some were concealed behind various pieces of furniture, others were standing visible so as to give some semblance of reality to any observer. It would not do to make it appear there was no one around to guard the house. That would evoke certain suspicion.

Perez sat in his huge study, one leg thrown carelessly over the arm of an overstuffed easy chair, a small book open in his lap. Under the book was a gun. Perez was a devious man as well as a careful one.

Diaz was one of those visible. The slim killer stood to one side of his boss, arms crossed. His eyes rested briefly on anything they touched, then were flicking away to something new. Everything about the man suggested speed, restlessness, agitation. There was a certain quickness to this man. His face betrayed him clearly to be a cruel, merciless individual. Everything about him suggested danger.

Another hour passed. Jake finally decided to investigate the house. Juan might be within. A trap could be awaiting within those walls. Whatever was there though, Jake was ready to meet head on. He would wait no longer. If a trap, then he had to spring it, and if the boy was there, then he had to take him out if possible.

Up to the window went his silent figure. He peered cautiously into one of the huge windows, glassless, surrounded by heavy drapes. The room appeared empty.

Might as well start here, mused Jake. He eased his big frame through the window. So silent was he that the men in the room awaiting just such a thing to happen did not hear him. Not a breath of sound was made by the old man.

The men, having been admonished to remain out of sight of the window, on the natural assumption that anyone coming through the window would surely be heard, did exactly as they were told. There were three of them. One behind a slender sofa affair, another lying full length on the floor behind the bed,

and the other hiding in the only closet in the room.

The man in the closet, having limited room and being a bit cramped, chose this moment to shift his position. The keen ears of the old man caught the movement immediately.

An angry hiss sounded. "Stupido! That is the fifth time you have moved since you entered. Have you thorns in your boots or something?"

A muffled reply came, "You are able to lie down. I must stand. You would move too, I think, were you in here."

Jake held his breath, then let it out slowly, soundlessly. So, it was a trap after all. Everything in him shouted at him to go back out that window and be gone from this place, but the fear that the boy was somewhere captive in the house pushed at him relentlessly.

He was going to try and slip through the room without raising an alarm. He crept forward, keeping his eyes on the two hiding places of the guards. He never even gave a moment's thought that there might be another guard in the little room. In fact, he was rather surprised that there were two in the room.

Brown eyes, wide with shock and surprise met his. The man was to Jake's left, lying full-length on the floor beside the small bed. The greener was at the ready to Jake's right, not quite what one would call a good position to be in when you wanted to shoot something on your left in a big hurry. Already, the man was in a tangled explosion of action. A gurgle of horror escaped his lips. The alarm had been given.

All Jake could do was leap back out of sight of the man. As he went back he fell, on purpose, to the floor, just in front of the sofa. The fellow there would be leaping up right about now and that fitted what Jake had in mind real good.

His rolling fall brought him up against the sofa. The shoulders and head of the guard poppped up about the same time the fellow behind the bed leaped into sight, wild-eyed, pistol aimed. He fired at the first thing he saw moving, which just happened to be the companion rising from behind the sofa to see what the alarm was all about; the bullet missed, but it scared the poor Mexican so badly that in the excitement of ducking he dropped

his weapon. A yell of surprise and anger erupted from the closet. The bullet had plowed through the closet.

"Let me out of here!" the closeted guard yelled. Although the bullet had missed, it had given the fellow temporary claustrophobia.

"It is the gringo!" managed the first guard, the one who spotted Jake.

He had spotted Jake lying on the floor. Jake had to shoot him. He shifted the scattergun just a bit to correct for the fellow's movement and pulled one trigger. He didn't wait to see the damage. It would be enough to put the fellow under ground.

Jake wriggled around the side of the sofa and was met almost head on by the guard who had been hiding on the other side and was now making for the window. The heavy boom of the shotgun had convinced him that this room was no place to be.

For a full second they just stared at one another, then Jake went into action. With a sweep of one big fist he swung a haymaker that landed flush on the other's mouth. Using the fist again he clubbed the man into insensibility.

He leaped up and ran for the closet. The doors on the small room were shaking violently. The man in the closet, not being the brightest sort of fellow, had closed the door upon himself and not once, until this moment, did it dawn on him that there was no handle on the inner side of the closet. After all, what use does one have of a handle on the inside of such a small closet? Well, until now anyway.

Finally, with a monstrous demonstration of what he possessed most, he tore the door completely off the wall, stumbled out and into instant darkness, provided by the butt of Jake's shotgun.

By this time, although less than a minute had passed since the alarm, not a person in the house was unaware that something was going on in the south wing of the house. But none of the men in assigned positions moved, save the group of four who had been designated to go to the aid of any area under attack. Besides, the rooms all exited into the one huge,

balconied entrance room. Guards were stationed all over in this room,both on the lower floor and the upper balcony areas.

Perez had not moved. He hoped the two intruders were taken alive. He'd also hoped for something a little more dramatic, a little more imaginative perhaps. For instance, in his study there were two ways to enter. One was by the roof, through a window high in the arched ceiling. The other was from Perez's personal garden. That was where he'd really hoped the entrance had been tried. It was, after all, a logical choice. It offered concealment and was easy to gain entrance to.

Perez had prepared a very unpleasant surprise there. He'd had Matsui, a brutal but devoted Apache slave, catch a large hamper full of live rattlesnakes and loose them into the garden. It would take a very light foot indeed to get through that garden unbitten.

It soon became apparent that the intruders, Perez thinking there were two, had not been subdued. He heard the heavy boom of the scattergun, followed by a spattering of several pistol shots.

The shots were being directed at a fast disappearing figure. All four of the men who had rushed to give assistance stood at the window firing methodically into the brush, hoping to hit something but knowing it was not likely. No one was anxious to leap out the window in pursuit. That had been the first intention of the men when they arrived to see the backside of Jake disappearing into the brush. A blast that had blown aside the drapes and sent bouncing pellets flying about within the room, kept the men from being overconfident. For all they knew the man might be lying there in the brush waiting for just such a thing again. And who wanted to be helped through a window by the wicked blow of a shotgun blast.?

When Jake had clubbed the man over the head coming out of the closet he had made his decision to run for it. He knew he would not be able to go very far into the house now that the alarm had been given. He had to leave the boy, if he was there. Jake was too young to die.

He went through the window with a supple motion and ran low for the shrubbery. Just as he reached the bushes he heard a shot and a hum over his head. He dove into the greenery. Instead of doing what most men would have done, that is, run for it, he turned and crawled back to the edge of the bushes. He saw the men in the act of crawling out the window. He leveled the greener and cut loose with both barrels. It was too far to be terribly dangerous but it sent enough lead through the window to keep them from trying to use it for a door.

Jake made for the rope ladder. He was doing all right for an old man. He had knocked off three guards and escaped. It looked like he might make it clear. All he had to do was clear the wall and he was good as gone.

But Jake slipped up. Made one little mistake. He'd not bothered to hobble his mare—a greenhorn stunt if there ever was one—and now the mare was gone, probably munching on some grass nearby. He lurched over the wall. There was no time to spend looking for her. He was as good as gone if he hung around here. If he came on her, fine, but if not, then he was on his own.

Jake set out to the west, trotting slow. If they didn't have a good tracker he'd make it fine. What bothered him was the fact that he had to cross so many miles of open ground. It wasn't looking so good. Not at all.

He'd gone about four miles when he spotted the dust cloud. It was moving his way in a dead line. Jake looked ahead, noting that the nearest shelter for a fight was several miles away. He sighed, then sat down, crossing his legs Indian fashion. Might as well rest.

They rode up slowly, not knowing what to expect. They were as sure of the capture as Jake was, but they were taking no chances. The Apache, Matzui, trotted just ahead of them. He stopped at Jake's side.

"You get a bone for finding me?" The words were in the guttural language of the Apache with whom Jake had had more than a passing interest in his day.

The stony, sun-blackened face of the Indian reflected nothing but Jake knew he'd scored by the flash of hatred the tracker gave him.

"Get behind Arturo there, old man." The command was given by a lean, hawk-faced individual.

There was almost no talking during the ride back. Once Jake had ventured an opinion as to the manliness of nearly a dozen men having to take one old man. It only drew an angry snarl from the lean rider.

Jake was brought into Perez's presence immediately. Well, almost immediately. One fellow made the mistake of trying to shove Jake along. Jake let fly with a fist and the brawl started. He was like a man gone berserk. Jake was like the old, battle-mad Vikings of long ago must have been in combat.

He grabbed one man by the arm and used him as a club, then flung him down. His huge fists thudded into mouths and stomachs with regularity. Jake used every dirty trick that he could. He butted one fellow square in the mouth, whirled and rammed his elbow under the throat of another. His knee jammed into a groin at the same time a fist shot out into a face.

But without a weapon he was doomed to failure. It took all told, fourteen men to subdue him. And then it was by sheer force of numbers. One man, trying to club Jake, missed when the big fellow spun to meet one of his attackers and dropped one of his companions in his tracks.

When they had him down they tied him this time, feet and hands, and dragged him into the house. It took a considerable amount of hide off his back. But the fight was gone out of him now. He barely felt the pain.

"Cut him loose," ordered Perez. He smiled, showing white, even teeth. "We must show politeness to our guests," said he.

Diaz walked over and stood over Jake while the ropes were being cut. When Jake looked up at him he said, "All dogs belong at the feet of their master, don't you think, gringo?" A mocking smile rested on his cruel features.

Jake struggled to his feet. With all the vulgarness he could

muster he hawked a big glob of spittle, mixed with blood, right in the center of the little killer's shirt. It ran down, following one of many ruffles.

He looked at the scar-faced man a short breath, then looking apologetic he said, "You was in my way, son. Shouldn't stand where a man's gotta spit."

Diaz was trembling. Never could he remember when rage had so mastered him. Pure hatred coursed through his veins as the insult penetrated deeper. Then he was at Jake.

Diaz was not a fighter in the physical sense. Always before he had dispensed with his enemies with a shot to the heart or head or back, whichever was more convenient. Now nothing would satisfy him but the tearing and mutilating of flesh.

He leaped at Jake with a knife, sweeping for the big man's neck. Jake leaned back and the blade sank deep into his arm. Jake grabbed the little man by the neck with one hand and the other hand found the knife hand, holding it in an iron grip. He began squeezing the gunman's neck.

Several men about started in to help but Perez waved them off. He remained still, watching in awe as Jake held the struggling, purple-faced gunman off the floor. He was enjoying this spectacle of his killer being manhandled.

The life was slowly ebbing from Diaz. A blackness had come to his eyes and he no longer could see. A roaring filled his head as unconsciousness flooded his mind. Then he was on the floor.

Perez, not wanting the death of Diaz but merely the humbling, had walked over and struck Jake in the head with the butt of a rifle. The big man went slack and crashed to the floor beside Diaz.

Diaz came to slowly. He began gasping for air and gurgling. When he could he sat up, holding his throat tenderly, tears brimming over in his eyes. His eyes looked around until they found those of Perez calmly studying him. In a weak, raspy voice he said, "Why did you wait until I was nearly dead?"

Perez smiled. "I wanted you to appreciate the fact that I saved your life."

Diaz glared at him, but Perez continued, "You owe me your life. Had I stopped it sooner you may have thought otherwise. Besides, I thought perhaps the great and deadly, much-feared slayer of men might get himself out. After all, you did stick your neck into his hands. I thought that if you were so foolish as to do that then you must have a plan to extract yourself." He added, "I see that you had nothing planned, except perhaps to die."

Too much had been taken out of the little man or Perez would have been lying on the floor with a bullet in his brain. Taking such liberties with Diaz was not something one did very often. But Perez was a smart man. He knew Diaz was not capable of murdering anyone right at this moment. That was why he chose this time to take his digs at the man.

Diaz struggled to his feet and wobbled out the door. Perez looked at the still figure on the floor and said, "Throw him into the dungeon."

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